# HALF HIS AGE

## JENNETTE MCCURDY

OceanofPDF.com

It'sbadformtogroanwhenaguy'sgoingdownonyou,Iknowthat,butrightnowit'shard not to.

"Youtastesogood,"hesays,lickinghislips."Thanks."

RandyJulep'sfingersclampdownonmysplayed-outthighs,hisdeathgriptightening.His cunnilingus technique is underwhelming: Eyes shut reverently. Occasional "mmm's". Slimy tongue that loop-de-loops over and over like a carnival ride, mechanical and passionless.

"Youknowwhat,whydon'tyoujustcomeuphere?"

"Youdon'twantmetokeepgoing?"heasks,cockinghishead.

"No, let's just… get to it."

"O-okay,ifyou'resure."Hetriesandfailstohidehisexcitementashewhipsacondomout from his pocket.

Randy runs his clammy hands through his mop of hair. The same mop of hair I found so mysteriouswhenwemetoverthesummeratthatfourthofJulyparty.Thesamemopofhairtha shieldedhishoodedeyeswhilewethrewbackred,white,andbluejelloshots,whileweatecor on the cob with too much butter, while we swam in Goose Lake and watched illegal fireworks burst in the ink black sky. The mop of hair I found so intriguing. So seductive. And that I now just find greasy.

"Youneedhelpwiththat?"IaskasRandystrugglestoripopenthewrapper.

"Um, would you?"

OceanofPDF.com

Hechucksitatme,Itearitopenandchuckitbackathim.Hekicksoffhisboxersand discards them in the corner.

I close my eyes and start moving my hands down, imagining I'm somewhere else, somewherewithsomeoneIconnectwith,someonewhogetsmeandwhoIgettoo.It'sashame Forasecond,IreallythoughtRandycouldbetheguy.He'squietandmoody.Ifiguredthatmus mean he had thoughts so riveting that he couldn't utter them out loud or he'd spoil them.

"Yourtitsarebeautiful,"hesays."Thanks."

"Sobeautiful,"herepeats,mashingandsquishingthembetweenhisfingerslikeakidwith ball of clay dough. "Your whole body is…"

"Thanks,"Isayagain,hesitantly.Maybeitisbeautiful,mybody.Iwouldn'tknow,sincei thetwoyearsthatI'vehadthisnewversionofit,I'vebeenmuchmoreconsumedwithdealing with it than appreciating it. Shaving it or scraping it or strapping it in or exfoliating it or lathering it or shoving a coarse cotton plug into it. Always doing something to stop my body from doing what it wants to do. Oozing or bursting or bleeding, making too much hair in the wrong places and not enough in the right ones.

I'm not used to this new body yet, with these new curves and stretch marks and this unrecognizable silhouette. It's like my smaller-framed, flatter-chested body could no longer contain all that was inside it, so it expanded to make room. Now it's ahead of my mind and my mindneedstocatchup.Needstorealizethisthingisn'tanAirbnb.Thisishomenow.Evenifit doesn't feel like it yet.

"Youready?"Randyasks,eyesnarrowingwithaweirdintensity.Iwanttoremindhimthi isn't Apollo 13, it's a couple kids about to fuck on a twin-sized bed.

OceanofPDF.com

“Yeah,”IsayinawispysexvoicethatIfeellikeI’msupposedtouse.

Randypumpsintomewithastaccatopump,pump,pump.Sameastheyalldo.Oratthelea
the three boys I’ve fucked, all of them with their boners and their closed comedones and their way of touching my body like they’re fumbling for their car keys. No passion, no bond. Just sweat and bumping and genitals. Body parts in body parts.

It’s not for lack of trying. They’re trying. I’m trying too. But no matter how much spit or cum, how much dry-humping or making out, going down or eating out, petting or edging, sex alwaysfallsshort.Feelsclunkyandperfunctory.Clumsyandperformative.Aglaringremin of the misshapen puzzle pieces that are private parts.

Andafterward,theyrebuckletheirpantsandIre-claspmybraandacceptintheawkward silencetheitchyfactthatIsettledforpleasurewhenIwantedconnection,anitchyfactthatI refuse to scratch by saying out loud, so instead we go and get ice cream.

Maybeit’sme.MaybeI’mtheproblem.MymomcalledmehardtolovewhenIwasseven andthephrasealwaysstuckwithmeeventhoughshesworeshedidn’tmeanittwentyminutes later, and by two days later she denied she ever said it at all.

“Youheardmewrong,”MomexplainedafterIbroughtituponourweeklytriptotheDolla Zone for snacks (jumbo bags of Cheetos and Sun Chips, a jar of Skippy, and a couple boxes of Hamburger Helper that usually expired before they got used) and essentials (toothpaste and toilet paper and trash bags so thin they rip if you fill them all the way up) and usually one novelty item Mom couldn’t resist (a cream for cracked feet or any product with the word “detoxifying” in it).

“Idunno,thosedon’tseemlikeeasywordstomishear,”Isaid.

She popped a stick of Big Red in her mouth and chomped down onit.

OceanofPDF.com

“Welljustcuzthey’renoteasywordstomisheardoesn’tmeanyoudidn’tmishear‘em.”“

“It’s alright. But just know I never said that. Maybe I said you were a lot. Because you are. Youneedalotandyouarealot.That’smebeinghonest,notmean.ButneverwouldIeversay you’re hard to love.”

Problem solved, I thought. I’m not hard to love, I just need a lot and am a lot. And then I grabbed a coloring book I wanted but thought better of it and set it back on the shelf. Maybe wantingthingsispartofwhatmakesmealot.IfIcouldjustwantless,I’dbetherightamount of person. The amount I’m supposed to be. The not-a-lot amount. The easy-to-love amount.

It’s an approach I’ve taken with me into my three relationships, if you can call them that, which you probably can’t. I’ve tried to not ask for much, and to expect even less. I’ve tried to make them feel funny when they all say the same jokes, feel smart when they all have the same point of view, feel right when a quick Google search confirms they’re not. I’ve tried to laugh on cue, smile on cue, compliment on cue. I’ve watered down my personality to a cardboard cutout version of myself, and I thought that was fine so long as my body showed up in 4D with bells andwhistles,readytograbandgropeandlickandsuck.ButthemoreItry,themoreIrealizeit’s not possible. A body can’t just connect on command, or find a spark that isn’t there, or force a nonexistent chemistry. You might be able to squeeze a couple of cheap thrills out of it, but eventually, the body says*no more*.

Like mine is saying to me rightnow.

“I’m gonna cum!” Randy shouts in myear.

Andhedoes.Atleasthedidwhathesaidhewasgonnado.Icanappreciatereliability,inany

OceanofPDF.com

Hepullsout,panting.Iglanceathisnightstand-athisplateofpizzacruststhat'sbeensitting out the past few times I've been here and his dog-eared copy of The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Fuck, lying face-up, like he's proud of reading it. I scan the floating shelves on his wall, crammed with soccer trophies, and the trifecta of movie posters pinned up next to them:*Scarface, Goodfellas, Pulp Fiction*. The Holy Trinity. What is it about boys and these three movies? Always with these three movies.

"Doyoueverfeellikeyourbodyandmindaresayingtwodifferentthings?"Iaskhim.

"Um…" Randy says, staring at me dumbfounded, "No. Not really, no. Do you?"

"Me?No… notreally,"Isay.It'sunsettlinghowoftenagreementdoublesasgivingup.

Randypeelsoffthecondomthenflingsitinthetrashlikeit'saslingshot,evensquintinghis eye for accuracy. He makes the shot at least. If you're gonna sling your progeny into your trashcan, you better make that shot. He snatches a dirty sock from the carpet and starts wiping himself off with it.

"Hey,Randy,"IhearmyselfsayingwhileIshimmyintomyjeans,myvoiceflatanddistan

"Mm-hmm?" he asks, still sopping up his cum with his own sock.

"I think we should…" I pause, trying to find the rightwords.

"Breakthingsoff?"heaskseffortlessly,tossinghissockintohisdirtyclothesbin."Hones I was kinda thinking the same thing…"

"Great."

"Great,I'mgladwecanbesomatureaboutit,"hesayswithaproudtwinkleinhiseye.He falls back onto his bed and kicks one foot over the other, swiping open his phone to laugh at some Reel a friend sent.

"See you around," I say over my shoulder as I headout.

OceanofPDF.com

“See you,” he says without lookingup.

And that’s that. As unceremonious as a breakup could be. No tears shed. No why’s or I can change’s.Justaclean,simplebreak.Anothercheapthrillcrumpledupandchuckedinthetras can. Or, perhaps, sling-shotted.

*OceanofPDF.com*

WhenIgethome,Ikickmyshoesoff,takealeak,andthrowthetoiletpaperawaysincewe've never not had clogging issues. I wash my hands with Mom's favorite hand soap, the lemon verbena from Bath and Body Works, five for $27. I do the dishes and a quick load of laundry, pop a frozen lasagna in the microwave, and check the kitchen island for Mom's latest stickynote:

*Waldo-*
*spendingthenightatTony's.There'slasagnainthefreezer.Haveagreatfirstdaytomorrow.*
*Senior year, baby! So proud!*
*Xxoo,Ma*

Idon'tknowwhyshestillbotherswiththestickynoteswhenshecouldjusttext-shemustthink they give a personal touch - or why I keep them all. I must think so too.

I head into my room with my lasagna and my sticky note, tuck the sticky note in the jewelry box overstuffed with them, and burn my tongue on the lasagna. I watch a hair tutorial on YouTube about how to do beach waves with a flat-iron and plug my iron in to follow along but give up midway through when I decide the girl doing the tutorial is just blessed with good hair and trying to monetize it. I switch to a video of a girl my age thrifting, then JFK getting his brains blown out in the back of that convertible, then a beauty guru's seven-hundred dollar Sephorahaul.Ifollowthelinksinherdescriptionboxtotheitemsfromherhaulasshetellsme that she seriously has a problem and needs to delete her Sephora app so that

she doesn’t keep purchasing multiple shades of products that she hasn’t even tried.

*OceanofPDF.com*

I order the same shades of cream stick blush that she did, except for venetian rose, which is soldoutandwould'velookedtooharshonmypaleskinanyway.Iknowthatablushisn'tgonn transform my life, but it's still nice to believe during the three-day shipping time that it could.

It's nice to believe the only difference between me and Margot Robbie is a stick of blush. It's nice to believe promises, even empty ones in cute typefaces on the backs of little cardboard packages.Especiallythoseones.There'ssomethingabouthowconcretetheyare,howassur those pretty little fonts, that feels more credible than the ones coming out of people's mouths.

I fill out the delivery page and the payment page, then my heart races as I scroll down to that bold,red,loomingPLACEORDERbutton.Iclickitandacombinationofregretandexcitem flushes through my body. A combination so potent that it leaves no space for whatever feeling lurks underneath it.

I polish off my lasagna with whatever taste buds survived that first bite, then wash my face, brushmyteeth,andpickmyzitseventhoughIknowIshouldn't.Igetinbedbutcan'tsleepso instead I scroll.

I end my night by loading up a cart on Shein despite the damning ethics of fast fashion becauseit'stheonlyplaceyoucangetapairofpantsfortwelvebucks.Thecancerwarning comes up on all the items, which I appreciate because it helps me prioritize my cart. Velvet trousers? Not worth the cancer. Crop top? It stays.

OceanofPDF.com

“I’m a failure,” is the first thing he says to us. “An absolutefailure.”

It’sdramatic,sure,butitgetsmetostopscrolling,whichismorethanIcansayofanyofmy other teachers - all of them trying to force a rapport, getting all chummy with us by cracking some “you get it” joke about Principal Sanders, the panic of their growing obsolescence bleedingthrougheveryword,asiftheapprovalofafewhormonalGenZ-ersmeansthey’restill relevant. Still in the game. Still a worthwhile human being.

“This was not my dream,” Mr. Korgy says as he paces up and down the rows, his loafers hitting the floor in a smooth, rhythmic beat. “I wanted to be a writer. A novelist. But I couldn’t handlethelackofsecurityrequiredtobeone.Icouldn’ttoleratethefluctuating,inconsequen strings of income. The consistent rejection. The scrutiny of my parents’ friends.*How’s thatnovelcomin’,champ?* Theuncertainty.IchosebeingabletoaffordtakeoutfromtheThaiplaceI likedoverroughingit,livingoffoframennoodles.Ichosegoingtothegamewiththeguysove submitting my short stories to publications. I chose catching up on my favorite TV show over finishing a draft. I chose comfort over betting on myself.”

MyattractiontowardMr.Korgyisinstant.Sosuddenit’salarming.Sopalpableit’sconfu

It’s not that he’s patently unattractive. He was clearly once a prize fighter. Once. But his looks havefaded.Atrophied.Witheredwiththegrossdecayofglaringmiddleaged-ness.Andnowall that’s left are his deep eyes and charming smile, the last

remains of a once good face.

TheguysI'vehookedupwithareallnicetolookat.Maybenotthestarquarterback,butthe kind of guy who's made at least a few girls' panties wet with his pouty lips or his tanned skin,

*OceanofPDF.com*

stretchedtightoverhisnewlymintedabs.Andyet,whatIfeeltowardMr.Korgyismoreinten
than anything I felt toward any of them.

SothenmaybeattractivenessandattractionareadifferentthingMaybewhatIfeltinthep
was… appreciation, for a good physique or face or haircut. For attractiveness. Maybe attraction is more primal, and makes less sense. Something that you know with your body instead of thinking with your mind.

"Did any of that catch your attention?" Mr. Korgy asks as he gets to the front of the class. "Andifso,why?
Ididnotsayanythingsmartorfunnyorcleverorwitty.Sowhythendidyou perk up?"

He tugs his pant legs up and leans against the edge of hisdesk.

"We are all wired to resonate with truth," he says. "We all crave it and we know when we hearit.Despiteallthesmalltalkandthechit-chatandthefacadesofdailylifethatwe'vegrown so accustomed to, we desperately want what's underneath. That's why for your assignments in this class, I will be asking that you bring truth to your work. And if I'm going to be asking that of you, I figure it's only fair that I give you that in return. That I lead with that. My truth. The truth about how and why I got here, to where I am today, a 39-year-old man teaching high school seniors at West High in Anchorage, Alaska. The truth about why I am a failure."

Myvaginapulses.It'snotabouthimbeingafailure.Idon'tknowwhosevaginawouldpul
at something like that. It's about him being able to call himself one. Him being able to be
brutallyhonestabouthisregrets,hisstatus,hisshortcomings.Notmaskthemthewayeveryo
else does, pretending to be fulfilled by their nine-to-five and once-a-year vacation to wherever had a discount on Kayak. By the pride of paying their taxes on time or always having a sheet of

stampsina“justincase”drawernexttoatubeofneosporinandanextraphonecharger.Thisis

OceanofPDF.com

someonewhofaced,head-on,thedisappointingrealityofwheretheirlifelanded,andiswilling to be direct and vulnerable about it.

IstudyMr.Korgy'sthinninghairandnosepores.Thebrokenbloodvesselsthatbloomatt sides of his nostrils. His soft jawline and the lines around his eyes. His so-called unattractive features that I'm so attracted to. It's excruciating. Intoxicating. Inevitable. This kind of attraction. The kind that already knows it's gonna be with him, it just doesn't know how.

*OceanofPDF.com*

“Ohmygod,thisfitssomuchbetter!
Lookatmyrack!”Sheshakesherbreastsinmyfaceand twirls around in the obnoxiously pink dressing room.

After a full day of cranky customers making demands for out-of-stock items as they douse themselves in half-bottles of passionfruit eau de toilette, I needed this reminder of one of the benefits of working at Victoria’s Secret: helping women feel better about themselves. It doesn’t takemuch.Sometimesjustawell-fittingbra.Yankthosetittiesupandtheself-worthcomeswithit.

Mostofthestoresatthemallhaveshutteredoverthepastfewyears– Dick’sSporting Goods, Barnes & Noble, Claire’s – because no one plays outside, reads, or lets a
sixteen-year-old pierce their kid’s ears anymore. So many stores are gone that the mall has started to feel post-apocalyptic anytime other than Black Friday and Boxing Day. Empty store after empty store - carpet ripped up, gates pulled down, 75% off EVERYTHING MUST GO signs hanging crooked in the windows. The last remaining survivors are the ones that cater to sellingwomenself-esteem–
inajar(Lush),abottle(BathandBodyWorks),apowder(Sephora), a handbag (Michael Kors), or a bra (Victoria’s Secret). We also have a food court.

“Those skanks at Macy’s have been telling me I’m a 36C… ulch,” the woman says with a cheek-click.“Gosh,fifty-eightandfinallygettingmyfirstbrathatfitsright.CanIcompliment you to the manager or somebody?”

“Uh,onceyoumakeapurchase,there’sawebsiteatthebottomofthereceipt.Youcangotc
that and fill it out. Or not. No pressure.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

“Nopressure?

Please,hun.Don’tgosellingyourselfshortwiththe‘nopressure’.Youhear me? I don’t like when women sell themselves short, bugs the crap outta me.”

“Oh. I’msorry.”

“Don’tgoapologizingnow,makesitworse.Sellingyourselfevenshorter,”shesays. “Lemme ask you this, do you know your worth?”

Thequestiontakesmeoffguard,especiallycomingfromawomanwho’sstandinginfron me topless with fried ends and poor boundaries. Also, I don’t know the answer. Or even the question really. What does it mean? How does one know their worth? What constitutes worth? I’m seventeen with bad grades. I live in a 900 square foot apartment with a single mom.

Ninety-nine percent of what I ingest are things sold in a 7-Eleven. And I know people say worth is a thing you’re born with, a thing you just intrinsically have by nature of being a human being, butI’mnotsosure.Peopleareoopreciousaboutwhatitmeanstobehuman.We’rejustpeople We’re just gross little people who shit and fart and fuck. Who eat too much dairy and search for meaning in our iPhones and carry at least one undiagnosed mental illness. People who, maybe, aren’t worth much at all.

But that all feels like too much to tell her, so I just nod my head and say, “Yeah, I think I do.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

Ikickoffmyshoes,takealeak,washmyhands,vacuum,throwsomeTotino'spizzarollsinthe microwave, and check the kitchen island.

*Doll-*

*atTony'sthenworkingthenightshift.Broughtyouabrownie.Missyousweetheart.Xxoo,M*

ThepizzarollsexplodebutIeattheirskinsanyway,thenwipethecheeseinnardsfromthewal of the microwave and head to my room with my brownie and my sticky note. I stuff the note in the jewelry box and the brownie in my mouth then change into some sweats and an oversized Nirvana t-shirt even though I don't know a single one of their songs.

Onmybed,Imorphintotheinternet-fueledfiendthattakesmeoverfrom10pm-2am, blue-light seeping into my pores and that questionable heat that radiates from my laptop beaming onto my face and lap, searing my ovaries.

I watch the vlogs of rich teenagers with embarrassing hairdos gifting strangers with Ferraris, courtesyoftheirYouTuberoyalties,andwonderwhereIwentwrong,howIcouldbebornint internet age and so not hip to it. I watch a string of 9/11 videos where people jump out of the burning towers to their deaths, then switch to a mid 30s woman organizing her sock drawer. I watcholdOlympicgymnasticsroutinesandJubileelineupvideoswherepeopletesttheirga or who's had plastic surgery. I watch sea otters snuggle and a mother being interrogated about the murder of her child - she confesses to drowning the

toddler in the backyard kiddie pool.

OceanofPDF.com

ThenIbegintoshop.Ipulluptabaftertab.Ravenously,violently.Shein,Forever21,Princ
Polly,Amazon,Target,Etsy,H&M,Zara,YesStyle,Boohoo.Iloadupcartaftercart.Tankto
and trousers, camis and cardigans, boots and bracelets and cheap denim that I'm sure will reek of formaldehyde. I alternate from tab to tab frantically, then check my Bank of America app.

$197 left and I'm not getting paid again until Friday. I'm low on gas and need to pick up tamponsfromWalgreens,plusgroceriesthatMomwillforgettobuy.Forever21'shavinga7
off sale sitewide, so Forever21 it is. I burn a hundred bucks with a single click and feel the rush of guilt, instantly knowing which items were mistakes. Where am I gonna wear a kimono and how am I gonna pull off balloon pants, and why is this kind of wherewithal completely inaccessible to me until clicking that PLACE ORDER button? Maybe it takes commitment to know you shouldn't have committed in the first place.

Iaggressivelyrefreshmyemailwhile Iwaitfortheorderconfirmationtocomethrough,b
my eyes grow heavy, and I fall asleep, my laptop pressing into me like a heating pad.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Mr. Korgy's giving his lesson on poetry - the difference between haikus and limericks and acrostics-

andexplainginghowanythingcanbepoeticbut,despitehispassion,peopledon'tgive ashit.Theyplayfootsie,theystudytheirmanicures,theymakesketchesintheirnotebooks.B they don't really hear him and they don't really see him. I do. I see the sadness in his eyes. And the deep desire for his words to resonate. The desire to connect. Maybe that's all passion is - sadness plus desire to connect.

Ican'tstopfantasizingabouthim.FantasiesIdidn'tknowIhadaboutthingsIdidn'tknow wanted. Perverted fantasies.

IfantasizethatIpourhisscentintoaperfumebottleandspritzmyselfwithitthroughoutth day so that I can smell like him - pine and musk and the faintest whiff of B.O.

IfantasizethatIlifthisshirtandtouchhispaunch.Watchitjiggle.Studythecurlyhairson his belly and lick them straight.

I fantasize about crouching down under his desk and unbuckling his pants, hearing the deviant jingle of his belt as they drop to the floor, then reaching into his wrinkly boxers and

cuppinghiswrinklyballs.Ticklingthem.Toyingwiththemuntilthey'retautandhopefulaga

I'veneverwantedsomeone'sgrosspartsbefore.Onlythegoodparts.Thesmoothparts,t clean ones, the buttoned and brushed and buckled ones. But with him, I want it all. Even the gross parts. Especially the gross parts.

"ForyourfirstassignmentIwantyoutowriteapoem,"Mr.Korgysays,leaningontheedg of his desk. "A short, simple poem. It must start with the words 'I Am From.' The rest is up toyou."

OceanofPDF.com

The bellrings.

“DueThursday,”hesays,reachinguptotuckastrandofhairbehindhisear.Hissilverchu
of a wedding band hits the harsh fluorescent light and flashes in my eye.

*OceanofPDF.com*

“Ican’tbelieveyoudidn’ttellme!”Franniesaysaswecrossthefrontlawntowardthe school parking lot.

“Eh,itwasn’tabigdeal.It’snotlikewewereeverserious.”

“Still! A breakup is a big deal whether it’s with a soulmate or a Randy Julep,” she says, then shestopsandgrabsholdofmyarmtostopmewithher,herdoe-eyesevenwiderthanusual,and her tone gets grave. “Waldo, you’re my best friend…”

I cringe at the term that she weaponizes so skillfully, that she wields as a threat like the creepydollthatcomesaliveattheendofthehorrormovie,walkingtowardyouwithpredatory green eyes. MY. BEST. FRIEND.

“...And best friends tell each other every-theen.”

I cringe at that too, the way she drops the g from the backs of her words. “Everything” becomes“every-theen”.“Thinking”becomes“think-een”.“Wondering”becomes“wonder-een.” I used to find it endearing. Now I find it grating. Grating. With a g.

Whenwemetwewereinseparable.IwenttoFrannie’shouseeverydayaftermiddlescho loved how big and clean and safe it felt, with the vaulted ceilings and the fancy alarm systemandtheappliancesthatblendedinwiththecabinets.WesiftedthroughFrannie’smo collection and made beaded necklaces and popsicle stick crafts, homemade candles and friendship cards. We set up a Slip n’ Slide on the grass and got welts on our bellies from sliding so many times on it. We pitched a tent in the

backyard and camped there for three nights. We sold lemonade on the corner of her street in the summer and hot cocoa in the winter, a buck a cup. Things were good.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Until one sleepover at Frannie's house early in the 9th grade. Mom left on a last minute triptoVegaswithherthenboyfriendsoIwenttostaywithFrannieforthe week.Bythispoint,I used to the inclusion of church activities. Didn't really mind. Sure, bowing my head for family prayer three times a day gave me a neckache and I never knew any of the references when we played Book of Mormon charades for Family Home Evening, but it wasn't a big deal.

But this time I actually went to church with them. Borrowed one of Frannie's puffy-sleeved pastrydressesthatitchedallthroughSacramentmeeting.ThenIattendedclasswithher.And lecture was on befriending the friendless. And how generous that is. What good charity work it is. How you curry favor with God for doing it. And I looked over and Frannie's eyes were lit up withrecognition,hearingherselfinthewordsasshesatattheedgeofherseat,almostfallingo from sheer, eager, do-gooder-ness. I realized I was the friendless she had befriended. A hole-punchonherGodstampcard.Afixer-uppertohersavior.Iwascharitywork.

Iwantedtoscreaminherfacethatshedidnthaveanyfriendseithertshedhavetoeat lunch sitting in the cafeteria alone too if she didn't have me. But then church class was dismissed and Frannie stood in a semicircle swapping bookmarks with her classmates. Her friends. I guess she did have them.

I want to get over it. Sometimes I feel like Iam.

"Well, if you need a shoulder to cry on or you just wanna talk, know that I'm here," Frannie says,andtheseareth etimeswhenIknowthatI'mnot.WhenI'mthirteenagain.Sittingthereo that cold foldout chair feeling like a charity case.

“Sure,thanks,”Isay,harsherthanImeanto.

“You’rewelcome,”Franniesays,proudofherowngenerosity.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Frannie releases my arm so we can resume the walk to our cars. She digs through her backpackforhercarkeysandIcatchawhiffofherGlossierfiglipbalmandAesopgeranium leaf body wash that makes her smell like a rainforest. I've always liked the way she smells.

"Well,I'mthisway…"Franniemotionstohercar,asparklingvanillaMINICooperthath parents bought her for her sweet sixteenth.

"I'mthatway,"Isay,noddingtowardmine,abeatenup2001ToyotaCamryIboughtfor eight-hundred bucks.

"Seeyoulater,"shesays,thensheturnsback."Andhey,seriously,I'mhereforyou.Ifyou need me in any way, call me."

"Iwill,"Isay,eventhoughIwon't.

And we head to our cars in their oppositedirections.

*OceanofPDF.com*

"I am from Carlos and Sierra," Vanessa starts, her voice catching with preciousness for herself. "I am from love. I am from a sun and moon in Gemini. I am from handstands and lemonadestandsandstandingupformyself.Iamfromhopscotchandbraces.Iamfromdoubl dutch and double dates. I am from hopes and dreams."

SoundslikeanAmericanGirlmagazineclippingtome.ButIlooktoMr.Korgytogaugeho he feels. Vanessa looks around expectantly. A cough somewhere. Mr. Korgy doesn't flinch.

"Thankyou,"hesaysblandly."Wehavetimeforonemore."

He looks good. He's clean-shaven today and his purple cardigan is a bolder color than the muddier-hued ones he's worn the past two days. This is a statement piece for sure, the kind of thing he probably only breaks out when he's got an extra pep in his step from nailing the New YorkTimescrosswordorfromhisweeklyweigh-incominginapoundortwoclosertohisgoal weight. Whatever he's celebrating today, I'm happy for him.

IhopeIlookgoodtoo.Tohim.Iwokeupforty-fiveminutesearlierthanusualsoIcouldflat iron my hair and get my makeup right. I took extra long on my eyeliner swipes to get the lines precise, patted concealer onto my spots carefully and blended it out with a brush instead of smearing it on while I sit on the toilet peeing the way I usually do, one hand dabbing the concealer and the other balling up a wad of toilet paper to wipe. I even used my "good" tube of mascara (the travel-size Benefit Fanfest I got free from some Sephora promotion) instead of the crusty drugstore tube I've

been using six months past expiration.

I slid open my closet door and rifled through the crammed racks, trying to piece together whateveroutfitIthoughtMr.Korgywouldlikebest.Bythetimehalfmyclosetwasonmybed

*OceanofPDF.com*

tearshadnearlybeenshed.Iwasstumped,halfofmeknowingthatmybodymakesupfor whatevermyordinaryfacelacks,sowhynotuseittomyadvantage? Theotherhalfofme thinkingthatMr.Korgyisagrownman.Amatureone.Andgrown,maturemendon'tget hard-onsoverapairofbouncytitsthewayaseniorinhighschooldoes.Theyhavemorerefined taste in women. They want a cultured woman. A woman who can read a book and sit through a ballet. A woman who values her body enough to not put it on display. A woman who respectsherself.

I first went for something scholarly, a button-down with an argyle sweater and trousers and oxfords and a "fun sock". But I felt too frumpy so I swapped the trousers for a pleated skirt with tightswhichwasslightlybetterbutstilllookedlikeagirlwho'salittletooexcitedtotellyouhe dreamvacationdestinationisTheHobbitonareainNewZealand.SoIripoffthetightsbutlea theskirtandbutton-downtokeepthingsacademic,thenthrowacorsettopoverthebutton-down to show off my shape and pull on a pair of over-the-knee boots to sex the whole thing up - becausenomatterhowmuchagrownmanwantsawomanwhocanreadabook,hewantsherto be able to suck a dick, too.

"Waldo,"Mr.Korgysays."Whydon'tyousharewiththeclass?"

I nod as a hot flash of nervous energy floods my body. My fingers grip my paper like a kid gripsthewallatanicerink."Iamfromawhitetrashtrailerpark.Iamfromamomwho'sneedy and absent at the same time. I am from a faceless father. I am from stubbed-out cigarettes and overdue apologies. I am from paper-thin pubescent

promises. From a back room in a house party. From a little too much Hennessy. From minimum wage and minimum effort. From a regret and a mistake. From one tipsy, horny night."

*OceanofPDF.com*

“Good,”Mr.Korgysays.Andhisfaceisstony,andhesaysitevenly,buthiseyessay something more. That he's impressed. That he likes me. That he sees me.

Afterclass,Irundownthehall,weavinginandoutofthecrowdofstudents.Ishoveopenth bathroom door and duck into a stall. I lock the door with my elbow and pull up Mr. Korgy’s Instagramwithonehandwhiletheotherhandslipsintomyjeansandunderthewaistbandofm

His main photo is cropped tight, neck up with the top of his head chopped. He’s wearing a browncorduroybutton-down-guesshedidn’tsolvetheNYTcrosswordthatday-andsmiling big, his blue eyes still striking even in a photo the size of my fingernail. I click on his profile, basking in my grotesque excitement. Excitement too big for a photo this small. For a person I don’t know. For a teacher.

But what’s the harm in a little crush? In a thing that feels this good? I keep touching myself with my right hand while my left hand scrolls down, down, down, through his photos. I click on oneofMr.KorgydressedupforHalloweenasWoodyfromToyStory,holdinghistoddlerwh dressedasBuzzLightyearanddroolingontohisspacesuit.Iclickanother,ofMr.Korgyandh wife on a dimly lit dinner date, leaning over a slice of chocolate cake with a single glowing candle. I click another, one that I’m guessing was taken by a professional since everyone’s dressed up more, and matching in denim and red tops - Mr. Korgy in a wool half-zip, his wife in a turtleneck, his kid in a flannel. They’re at an apple orchard. Mr. Korgy holds a basket of honeycrisps. His wife has a hand on his back and the kid is running toward the camera. They all look like they’re so joyous the joy might rip them open from the inside out. I zoom in on Mr. Korgy’sface,likeifIgetcloseenoughI’llseethetruth.Thefatigue.Thedisconnect.Thesign

that maybe this was the one picture that worked out of a two-hour shoot.

Out of a batch of300

OceanofPDF.com

that he and his wife splayed out on the kitchen table, deliberating. Frustrated with shots where thekidscreamedorshescowledorhelookedtootired.Frustratedthattheyweren'tfindingan good ones. Until this one. This one worked. This one was the clear frontrunner, the only frontrunner. The most convincing shot, the one that sold "happy family" best.

ButIdon'tseeanysignofthatonMr.Korgy'sface.

So I zoom back out, staring at the obnoxious, genuine joy of this family unit. A kind of familialjoyI'veneverknown.Andsuddenly,whatfeltgoodtwentysecondsagocurdlesinsi

I go back to his profile and scroll down further, further, several years back, as far as his account goes. I click on a photo of just him. There's a half-decorated gingerbread house on the table in front of him. He's holding a piping bag of icing and there's a gumdrop stuck to his nose with it. He's mid-laugh. Big laugh. Laughing-fit level laugh, the kind of fit that only strikes a coupletimesayear.Sharingitwiththepersonontheotherendofthecamera.Probablyhiswif maybe just his girlfriend back then. Someone who knows him in a way I don't.

Butinthisphoto,Ican'tseethatperson.SoIcanpretendI'mtheminstead.IcanpretendI'n theonewhomadehimlaugh,who'stakingthephotoofhim,whoknowshimbetterthananyor else. I start to touch myself faster, and faster, and faster, until my body convulses with spurts ofpleasure.

Afterward,Iwashup.Thesoapdispenser'soutsojustwater.Vanessa'satthesinknextto

"Ilikedyourpoem,"shesays."Thanks."

OceanofPDF.com

She looks at me, waiting for the reciprocal compliment I can't in good faith give her, so I giveittoherinbadfaithandshedoesn'tseemtoknowthedifference.Ileave,andontheway out, I sniff my fingers.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Tab.Tab.Tab.Tab.Add-to-cartadd-to-cartadd-to-cartadd-to-cart.Knitwearandbagcharms and brown mary janes, jumbo scrunchies and animal-print claw clips and faux suede kitten-heel boots that can't handle Alaska's snow, but I don't care. I keep adding. A cropped puffer, a metallic puffer, a signet ring, a corduroy bomber jacket, a silver cuff bracelet, a cardigan… a purple cardigan… a chunky, purple, statement piece cardigan…

I shut my laptop and grab my notebook and pencil from my backpack so I can start on the latestassignmentfromhim.Iwritehurriedlybutwithsingularfocus.Everythingelseevapor andforamoment,Ifeelcalm.Grounded.Tethered.Thereisnoracingmind.Thereisnominda

*I'm five years old. Mom's getting me ready. On a regular day, I can wear whatever. APocahontes t-shirt and orange shorts or overalls and cowboy boots. But not today. Because todayDad'scomingover.AndwhenDadcomesover,Momgetsstressed.AndwhenMomget stressed, we get pretty.*

*"Bestwaytokeepamanistobeasprettyasyoucanbe," shesayswhilesheglideslipstickon Then she smacks her lips together and says it's my turn to get pretty.*

*Momputsmeinmygooddressandrollsmyhairinhotcurlers,rubbingoilontotheendsso look all shiny. She puts lip gloss on me and even a little mascara on the tips of my eyelashes. By the end of the routine, I'm a mini version of her.*

OceanofPDF.com

*Dadcomesover.Weallsitdownfordinner.MomlooksatDadandDadlooksathisphone.*
*Get us some new dresses.*

*Nexttimewedogetnewdressesandwedokeepthecurlersinlonger.Momputsmascaraon*
*full lashes, not just the tips. Dad comes over. He looks less at his phone and*
*more at Mom.*
*Evenstaysfordessert.Atonepointtheygotothebedroom.Ipressmyearagainstthedoorand*
*hear Mom making ooh-noises. She sounds happy.*

*Ashe'sleaving,Dadreachesintohiscoatpocketandpullsoutaplasticcapsulefromagro*
*store quarter machine. Inside is a jelly hand toy. He shows me how it sticks*
*on a window. Says it'll be there for days.*

*DadleavesandMomseemsrelaxed.Wemust'vedonebetter.Beenprettier.Prettyenoug*
*off the window.*

*I'msevenyearsold.Thehotcurlershaven'tcomeoutoftheclosetinoverayear.Kidsatschoo*
*a week. I swear to myself that as soon as I'm old enough, I'll get a job so*
*that I can use my money to buy myself enough clothes that I'll be able to*
*wear a new shirt every single day.*

*Even though Dad doesn't come around anymore, other men do. Some of*
*them Mom's age,some of them older. They rarely stay long. They always*
*smell weird. Like chili and perfume. Mom pays me less attention so I make*
*friends with kids in the other mobile homes around us.*
*KimberlyandRobinandAngelica.Weplayhiden'seeknearttheswampandmakemudpies.W*
*playjumpropegames-*
*SnakeandHelicopter.Weputwaterandfruitchunksintoicecubetrays*

OceanofPDF.com

*withtoothpicksstickingouttomakehomemadepopsicles.Wehavefun.ThenRobinmovesaw*
*Angelica. Then Kimberly. And I'm the only kid left in the mobile home park.*
*Sometimes I still make popsicles.*

*I'mnineyearsold.Weliveinanapartmentnow.Mom'sboyfriendgotherajobdancing.Iaske*
*if it was tap but she said not quite. Too bad. I've always liked tap dancing.*

*People comment wherever we go that Mom and I look like sisters. Older women often askhowoldshewaswhenshehadme.Whenshesayssixteen,thewomensay"Oh"andtrytosm their best smiles, but I can tell they want to shake their heads or say tisk-tisk or both. It's funny how people try to show you one thing but secretly show you another.*

*LikeMom.Sometimesshe'llshowoffanewblouseandactlikeshe'sexcitedaboutthefabu though, even if I don't mean it, so I guess I do it too.*

*Mom'sboyfriendbreaksupwithher.Shesobsintomylap.Istrokeherhair.ItsmellslikeV The strawberries and cream scent. She cries and says I'm all she has. That ever since shesawthatpluslineonthatstick,sheknewshewantedtokeepme.Orthatshecouldn'tbearto get rid of me. Which is really the same thing. I don't know what she means exactly, but I know thattheydon'tsoundthesametome.Wantingtokeepsomethingisverydifferentthannotbein able to get rid of it.*

By the time I'm finished, it's almost two. I pull open my shopping cart tabs and am about to choosethewinningcart,butnoneofthemlookasgreatastheydidafewhoursago.Idon'teven

like animal print. Or scrunchies.

OceanofPDF.com

I clear my carts, then pull up Mr. Korgy's Instagram and masturbate to it using a bottle of tropicalTumsfrommybathroomdrawertogrindon.Thegroovesfeelnice.Ifallasleepwith the bottle in my hand.

*OceanofPDF.com*

ThefirsttimeMr.Korgyasksmetostayafterclass,it'sthemiddleofOctober,myfavoritetime of year in Alaska. The air's cold but not bitter. Just enough to wake you up.

"Thanksforstaying,Waldo,"Mr.Korgysaysasthelastofthestragglersfileout.Hefiddle with the stem of one of the warty gourds he's got perched on his desk. They're an ugly nod to the season, which I appreciate. More personality than a pumpkin.

"I'msureyou'vegotplacestobe,peopletosee,thingstodo,"hesays."I'llonlykeepyouas

I don't have anywhere to be. I don't have any people to see. I don't have any things to do. This is it. The moment I've been fantasizing about for the past six weeks, a fantasy that has carriedmethroughthebanalhabitsofmylife-themeatloafcafeterialuncheswithFrannieand the part-time shifts at Victoria's Secret and the haphazardly scribbled sticky notes and the cardboard frozen dinner trays and the late night shopping binges and the sugary candies loaded with colorful food dyes. The moment where I'm alone with him.

Mr.Korgyshutsthedoorbehindhimandtakesaseatontheedgeofhisdesk,pullinguphis pant legs before he does. It's a gesture that separates a boy from a man, a Mr. Korgy from a Randy Julep. He narrows his eyes, trying to assess me, and rubs his chapped lips together.

"IwantedtotellyouIreallylikewhatyou'vebeendoinginclass,"hesays.

"Thanks," I say.

"Don'tthank me.Just being honest,"he shrugs. "Areyou always soengaged inschool?"

I'mnot.Iusuallyscrapebydoingthebareminimum,sneakingnapsinclassesandlettingm assignmentscollectGoldfishcrackerdustatthebottomofmybackpack.Idon'tevenreallyca aboutthesocialaspects-fitting inwiththisgrouporthat,

clutchingmypearlsoverwho’sgonna

OceanofPDF.com

invite me to junior prom (It was Paul Bornstein. We had sex in the back of his car. We both understoodthroughsuchnon-verbalcuesasmydisgustedlyspittinghiswaterycumintoanold Slurpee cup in his center console, and his flirting with Lexi Shepherd the entire night, that it was, undeniably, over between us.)

"Um.Iwouldn'tsayI'musuallyengagedinschool.IwouldsayIengagewiththingsthat grab my attention."

"I see. So writing grabs your attentionthen?"

I can't tell him that the only reason I've taken an interest in writing is because I've taken an interest in him. That he is the goal. The objective. That writing is just a means to an end. A chancetoimpresshim,orbetter,toconnectwithhim.SoIsettleforaslightlylessembarrassin

"Iusedtojournalalotinmiddleschool,"Isay,instantlyhatingtheimagethat'sconjured,r pouring out my "feewings" in between flower doodles and puffy letter art of my crush-of-the-moment'sname.Itsoundssojuvenile.

"ButIhaven'tinawhile,probablynotsincefreshmanyear,"Iadd,whichisprobablytrue but more about me trying to sound above it.

"Welljournalingcanbeagreattool,"hesayswithcompletesincerity thatdissolvesmy self-loathing. "Why'd you stop?"

"I'mnot sure. I guess it started feeling more like an obligation than an outlet. Than anescape.

And eventually it just kinda fadedaway."

"Huh," he says. "You oughta get back into it. Keep that writing muscle strong. You have somethingalotofmyotherstudents,*most*ofmyotherstudents,don'thave.Doyouknowwha

that is?”

OceanofPDF.com

I

shake

my

head.

“Avoice,”hesays.

“That’sararity,”hesays.

“Andyouhaveone.Youhaveastrongvoice,”hesays.

Andyetrightnow,inhispresence,I’munabletosayaword.

*OceanofPDF.com*

WhenIgethome,Mom'ssittingatthekitchentableinthefarcorner,theoverheadlight flickering onto her face.

"JesusChrist,youscaredme,"Isay."Whatareyoudoinghere?"

"Whatdoyoumean'whatamIdoinghere'? I'mthatbadofamotherthatyouthinkIcan't be home to take care of my daughter?"

"No, no. You just…

scared me."

"Sweetheart,whydon'tyoutakeaseat?"

Ipullupthedrop-leafandsitacrossfromMom,gettingacloserlookather.Splotchyeyes, crumpled tissue, dirty Safeway apron still around her neck from her shift. An empty bottle of wine tipped over on the countertop behind her, the dregs pooling out like a crime scene.

"Welp,"shesays,clearingherthroattostaveoffavoice-crack."Hebrokeupwithme."

I look at her, rings under her eyes that read more forty-five than thirty-four. They're the kind of dark circles that are made worse by lack of sleep and stress but that originate from good old fashionedgenes,whichisprobablywhyhintsofthemarealreadystartingtocreepontomyfac At least she's got good lips.

"Tonybrokeupwithme,"sherepeats,scratchingthebackofherhandwhereherspraytan has already started to wear off. Guess the lemon verbena is a double-edged sword.

"I'msorry,Mom."

“It’salright.It’snotyourfault,mylove,”shesays.“God,Ijust–Ireallythoughthewastheone.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

I didn't. Mom hasn't aged out of her habit of falling in love with unavailable men. Shecreatesandnursesafantasyinhermindofwhattheguycouldbe,whatthetwoofthemcoul together, instead of living in the reality of what he is, what they are. Then when she's broken up with, she's blindsided and sent into a spiral where she can't get out of bed for weeks.

A part of me likes the company. Sometimes we'll plow through a couple seasons of a reality show,*The Bachelor*or*Amazing Race*or*Survivor*. Lots of*Top Chef*. Once I even got her out of bedlongenoughtoface-offinagrilled-cheesequickfirechallenge.Iletherwineventhoughthe sundried tomatoes she used had expired.

Butthosearethegoodversions.Therearealsothebadversions.Theoneswhereshestares a wall four hours a day, won't touch the Campbell's chicken noodle soup I heated up for her. MatsherhairupsobadIhavetocuttheknotsoutwithdullscissors.Losestenpounds.Andher job. No matter how much I want her company, I don't want it like that.

And then the only thing that gets her up and running again, that gets her to be an active participantinherlife,thatgetshertoapplyforanew,somehowevenlowerpayingjobisashin new man. This is her boom-and-bust cycle. And it always starts with her thinking she's found "the one."

"That'stoobad,Ma,"Isay.

"Ohit'swayworsethan'toobad',honey.It'sawful.Justfuckingawful.Justcallin'aspad spade," she says, then she leans forward on her elbows and presses the inner corners of her eyebrows with her thumbs, trying to alleviate her oncoming migraine.

“Ulch,whyWaldo?WhyamIlikethis?”

Idon’tknowhowtoanswerher.Idon’tknowwhysheisthewaysheis.Isithereditary,like the bags under her eyes? Or is it something that can be traced back to her own childhood, toher

OceanofPDF.com

parents'shortcomingsandherkid-braininternalizationofthem? Somethingshecouldadjust with a series of therapy sessions that she can't afford?

"Shit,I'msorry,"shesays,handsintheair,exasperatedwithherself."Idon'tmeantoput this on you. It's unfair of me, as your mother. Unfair to you. Ulch, don't wind up like me,Waldo."

Sheblowsherraw,rednoseintoheroverlysoiledtissue,makingitworkharderthanitneed to, punishing it, refusing to grab a fresh one. "Whatever you do, don't wind up like me."

"Whatdoyoumean?"Iask.Iknowexactlywhatshemeans.Ialsoknowshelikestoexplain it to me.

"Don't let men run your life. Ruin your life, I should say." (Blows nose.) "Don't let 'em distract you." (Blows nose.) "You've got a good brain and a good heart and men will take both andmess'emuprealbadandyou'llwindupworkingatSafewaydouble-bagginggroceriesand asking people to click a goddamn green button a hundred times a day. Don't fall for their traps, no matter how blue their eyes are. They could be fucking cerulean, it don't matter." (Blowsnose.)

"Youshouldn'thavetoseeyourmotherlikethis,"shesays."Ishouldbestrongerthanthis Betterthanthis.I*wish*Iwasbetterthanthis."

"It's fine, mom."

"Youdon'tgottasaythat,sweetheart."

"I know."

"IguessIamtryingmybest,"shesays,heroffhandeddeliverybetrayedbyherreassurance seeking eyes.

OceanofPDF.com

“Of course you are,” I say, as much to convince myself as to convince her. She has been raisingmealoneallthistime.Sure,“raising”isaloosetermbutdoesn’tthefactthatshestayed count for something? She’s the one who stayed. That’s not nothing.

“I’m gonna be around a lot more, sweetheart. Alright? A lot more,” she says, and then her facelightsupasifshe’sgotanewidea.Onlyit’snotanewidea.It’sthesameideashehasevery time a man moves on from her. “You know what we should do, Waldo? You know what we’ve gotta do?”

ShealwaysswearswehavetotakearoadtriptoSewardbecausewetookoneoncewhenI was four and apparently we fished and laughed and went barefoot in a glacial water stream. Apparentlyweatepimentocheesesandwichesandwentonawalkinarichneighborhoodanc pointed to all the two-story houses we swore we’d live in someday. Apparently it’s Mom’s favorite memory of us together. I don’t remember it.

“Road trip to Seward?” Iask.

“How’d you know?” she asks, seeming so genuinely surprised that I wonder if she is. If breakupsareblackoutsforher,andassoonasshe’sthroughthem,shehasnorecollectionofth ideas she pitched, the promises she made.

“You know, if there’s one blessing in all of this it’s that it’s helping me set my priorities straight,”shesays.“You’remypriority.Alwayshavebeen,evenifthereareTimesitdoesn’t seem like it. Times I fail as a mother. I’m not gonna fail again. I’m gonna be better.”

Andthenshelooksatme-

hergreeneyescoatedinaknowingglaze,anawarenessofallher shortcomings combined with a real desire to change - and I can't help but believe her.

"Iknow,Mom,"Isay."Iknowyouare."

*OceanofPDF.com*

I'mspeed-
walkingthroughthelibrarytowardMr.Korgy,myheartpounding,myfacehotwithanger.

If Frannie hadn't said that fucking word, I wouldn't have to do this. I'd have gone on thinkingwhatMr.Korgysaidwasacompliment,ignoranttothebackhandednatureofit.But she did say that fucking word.

WeweresittingatlunchandsheaskedwhichclassesIwasenjoying.Ishould'vedeflected It'sonmethatIansweredhonestly.Butafeelinghadswelledinmychest,alittlefireballof excitement, of pride, that I couldn't override, and it just spilled out of me.

"Creativewriting,"Itoldher."Actually,myteachersaidmystuffisprettygood."

HerfacetwistedwithsomethingthatIthoughtwascuriositybutthatInowknowwas suspicion, and she asked if it was personal writing, and I said yes.

"Ohyeah,"shesaid,thesuspicioninhereyesmeltingintoclarity."Ibetthat'sreallyharro een."

There it was. That word, like an expletive.*Harrowing.*

"It'snotharrowing,"Ishotback,hittingthegespeciallyhard.

"Oh,Ididn'tmeanitinabadway,"shesaid,eventhoughIknowshedid."Justareality.It's emotional,youknow?Yourlifestory.Harrow-
een.I'msurethatmakesitgood.Impactful.Like you said, your teacher really liked it."

"Being harrowing doesn't automatically make a thing good. Or impactful. It can bog something down. Make it heavy-handed. And actually, some of what I write is pretty funny.
Goodwritinghasnothingtodowithhowcrazyornotthefactsofthestoryare.Goodwritingis

OceanofPDF.com

inhowyoutellthestory.Ingettingpeopletofeelwhatyouwantthemtofeelwhenyouwant them to feel it."

Frannietookalong,bubblingsipofherchocolatemilkandgavemethatlookthatIgetfrom my coworkers when they overhear me dealing with a difficult customer. That bug-eyed "somebodyneedstorelax"look,onlyithitsdifferentlywhenyou'retheonewhoneedstorela

"I've gotta go," I said, leaving my lunch tray behind and hurrying through the hallways, askingteacherswhereMr.KorgywasuntilMr.Adamstoldme.Ipushedopenthedouble-doors and saw him instantly, straight ahead toward the back of the library, sitting at a table, his lunch set out in front of him.

"Itwasn'tafuckingcompliment,"IblurtoutasIapproachhim.Somestudentsglanceatm

"Whoa,Waldo,what'sgoin'on?"Mr.Korgyasks,andIcan'ttellifhe'smoresurprisedb my presence or by my language. He wipes a tiny glob of mayonnaise off his lip and sets his sandwich down in its tupperware container next to the stack of papers he's grading.

"Whatyousaidtometheotherday,thatI'mtalented?ThatIhaveavoice? Yousaidthatcuz you pity me. Cuz you think my life was hard. Or is hard or whatever."

Mr. Korgy reaches out slowly, as if he's got an endless amount of time, and grabs the tupperwarecontainerthatholdshissandwich.Hesnapsonecornerofthelidsoitsealstightly, then rotates the container and snaps the next corner, then the next, then the next. There's something about the gesture that irks me. The ease to it, the absolute measured nature, the complete confidence, the unaffectedness. I'm standing in front of him pelting him with accusations, and he's got nothing to

do but snap a sandwich container.

“YouthinkIpityyou?”Mr.Korgyasks.

*OceanofPDF.com*

“Yes.Ido.”

“I’mtheonewhointroducedhimselftotheclassbysayinghewasafailure.”

“Sure, but that was… for dramatic effect. That wasn’t

real.”

“Canitnotbeboth?”

“I

guess

it

can…”“...But?”

“ButIhaveahardtimebelievingitwas.”

“And why is that?”

“Because what I wrote in my assignments, that’s stuff I haven’t told anyone. Stuff I’m ashamedof.StuffI’vetriedtohideordownplayorignore.Butwithyourspeech,youpracticed that. I could tell. You say it to all your students. And I know you said it was the truth. But now I’mthinking,howcoulditbe? Isn’ttruththethingwetrytohidethemost?Notthethingwe’re most ready to share?”

“Huh,”Mr.Korgysays,scratchinghisstubble.“Guessyou’vegotmethere.Maybeyou’ right. Maybe I’m just a hack.”

He picks up his coffee thermos and takes a long pull from it all while staring directly at me theentiretime.It’sdisarming.Unnerving.Idon’tknowwhattodowithit.Howtorespond.So don’t. He sets the thermos back down on the table and crosses his arms one over the other.

“And if you are right and I am a hack,” he goes on, “If I’m a teacher

spewing monologues abouthisfailuresasasort-ofperformanceart? Ateacherwhoputsonaone-manshowforhis high school students? Would you not pity me?"

"Yeah,Iguessthatiskindofpitiable."

*OceanofPDF.com*

“Ofcourseitis!

Waldo,everyone’salittlepitiablewhenyouexaminetheirlifeclosely enough,” he says. “And if everyone’s pitiable, no one is.”

I see his point but I’m still not satisfied. I want more. And I can tell that he knows that in the way that he’s studying me, tilting his head back, peering at me like he’s toying with giving me that something more but still hasn’t decided if he should or not. It’s odd, being stuck in that momentwheresomeoneisdecidingiftheyshoulddoleoutthecomplimentornot.Thatmom wheretheygettodecideifyou’reworthy,ifyou’regoodenough,orifonsecondthoughtyou’ actually not quite up to snuff, and you can’t do anything but sit back and watch.

“Youknowwhat,Waldo,”hestarts,havingmadehisdecision.Iamworthy.Iamgood enough. “Not only are you not pitiable, I think you’re downright respectable.”

ItmeanstoomuchtomebutIcan’tmakeitmeananyless.Herespectsme.Mr.Korgy respects me.

“Thanks,”Isay.

Mr. Korgy laughs and tells me I need to stop thanking people so easily, that people should onlyreceivea“thankyou”iftheyreallydeserveone,thenheglancesatthewallclockandsays thathehastogetgoing.Hestuffshissandwichcontainerandhispapersintohismessengerbag andslingsitoverhisshoulderbutthestrapsnapsandthebaglandsonthefloor,thecontentsof it spilling out. Mints and papers, pens and notebooks. He blushes and says the bag is fifteen years old, that he’s had the strap replaced twice but this still happens all the time, that his wife Gwen begs him to get a new one, a nicer one, a trendier one, but that he doesn’t want to.

“Becauseyoucan’tgetridofit?”Iaskhim.

He grins. “Because I

want to keep it.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

Not one but three sticky notes on the island this time, a trilogy of personaltouches.

*HappyHalloween,doll!!*

*There'saTwixbarinthefridgeforyou.Knowyoulike'emcold.*(next sticky note)*Patched things up with Tony after all, thank God. Was scared there for a minute,really thought things were over.*(next sticky note)*A man could be good in both our lives, youknow? I want you to meet him soon. Maybe we could do a dinner. Xxoo, Mom*

It'snotMom'sfault,forneedingtobelievethingsabouttherselfthataren'ttrue.It'smyfau if I believe those things when I know better.

IgrabtheTwixoutofthefridgeandeatitonmywaytomyroom.Igototuckthesticky notes into my jewelry box, but I throw them away instead.

*OceanofPDF.com*

When Mr. Korgy comes into Victoria's Secret, it takes me a second to recognize him out of context.He'snotwearinghisusualteacherlyclothes-lived-inandlumpy,thecolorsfadedfrom onetoomanytimesinthewash.Insteadhe'sinablacktracksuitwithacrispcoatovertop,anda gray baseball cap hoods most of his face. At first I think he's just a regular customer, about to readfromalisthiswifewroteforhimandmispronouncethebrashewants,thenhurryoutofthe store before he can be seen by anyone he knows. But then he lifts his head and his sad eyescome into full focus.

"HeyWaldo,Ispottedyouthroughthewindowandfiguredishouldcomesayhi."

Mybrainfloods,scramblingtocomeupwithsomethingthatwillimpresshim,butnothing comes to mind so I just say hi.

"Iwastryingtofindapresentformykid'sfifthbirthdaybutdidn'trealizethetoystorehad closed down."

"Ohyeah,awhileago,"Isay,thenfeelsomethingpushingitswayupmythroat.It'san urgent thing, desperate for connection, so desperate it needs to force a joke.

"Fuck kids, right? Who needs an imagination?" I say, instantly regretting it. The put-on brazenattitude.Thepubescentspunk.Thetry-hardsnark.Thepick-megirllook-how-edgy-I-am cuz I can make low-hanging fruit jokes. This isn't me. It's pathetic.

Mr. Korgy narrows his eyes and lets out a faint "Mm" of acknowledgment. But that's it. A simple gesture of course correction. It makes me appreciate him even more. For not indulging myreachwithanunwarrantedlaugh.Fornotlettingmegetawaywithitunscathed.Heknows

it’s beneath me, and he refuses to engage.

OceanofPDF.com

I consider apologizing, but I don't want to make the moment any weirder, so I let it go and webothjuststandhere,acouplefeetawayfromeachother.There'sanoddkindofintimacyto the moment. I simultaneously want it to be over immediately and want it to go on indefinitely.

"Welllook,I'mgladIcaughtyouthough,"hefinallysays."I'vebeenwantingtotalktoyou about something…"

Acool,wetspotgrowsinmyunderwear.Icatchahintofasweatbeadunderthebrimofhis baseball hat. Is he nervous? Or just hot under the bright store lights?

"Itoldmywifeabout you,"hesays."About howIhaveakid thisyearwho'sreallygood. Verypromising.Shesaidmaybeweshouldhaveyouoverfordinner."

"Really?" I ask.

"Notapitydinner,ofcourse," headds."Adinneroutofrespect."

*OceanofPDF.com*

It began last night with a Target trip to pick up all new toiletries. My bathroom cabinets are alreadyoverflowingwiththembuttheimportanceofthisdinnerbegsfornewones,shinyone betterones,likeifthebottlesarefull,ifthelabelsareintact,ifthepackagingisbrandnew,then I will be, too.

I got fresh razors, overpriced shaving cream, hair/skin/nail gummies that supposedly take a month to kick in but that I figured I could expedite by taking four times the daily dose, a coconut-scented leave-in conditioner, cherry red nail polish, a watermelon overnight lip mask (same thing as a lip salve but with an excuse to charge twice the price), whipped body butter, vanilla jasmine body spritz, a four-way nail buffer block, a brown sugar exfoliating body scrub, andatwo-dollarfacemaskwithpackagingthatenthusiasticallyshoutsmeitspromiseofmaking my skin more supple, vibrant, and dewy - the kind of promise I believe. The total was a whopping $114 dollars that my VS salary can't afford but that I justified as a reasonable price point for investing in myself. Some people choose to further their education, I choose perfume.

And now I am doing it. Making myself beautiful, or at least bringing my attractiveness up a pointortwo.Itmightseemlikealotoflaborforonlyamildimprovement,butit'snotaboutthe improvement,it'saboutttheeffort.Andwhattheeffortcommunicatestome.ThatI'mworthy this attention, this head-to-toe scrupulousness. Or at least he is.

Ishampoomyscalpaggressivelyenoughtowashawaymysins,thensmearahandfulof goopy conditioner onto my hair, comb through it, and clip it in place with a

claw to let the conditioner seep in.

OceanofPDF.com

Iscoopadollopofthesugarscrubontomylegsandscrapeitintoeverypore.Therecan neverbetoomuchscraping,toomuchsloughingoff,ofawoman'sbody.Whatisawoman, really, if not silky? If not smooth? If not supple, perky, and poreless?

Isquirttheshavingcreamontomylegsanddragtherazorwithsurgicalprecision,likeit's my duty, my honor, my magnum opus to shave this very leg.

Aftertheshower,Ismearonthelip"sleepingmask"andrubinmoundsofbodybutter.I throw back my quad dose of gummy vitamins and smack a mask on my face before filing, buffing, shining, and painting all twenty nails.

Idabconcealeronmyinflamedspots,spreadonepumpoflightweightfoundationacross face, pat a thin layer of creme blush onto my cheeks and lips, and comb one coat of jet black mascara through my eyelashes. I blow-dry my hair and sear it into beach waves with my flat-iron.Itdoesn'tlookhalf-bad.Maybethattutorialdidhelp.Ithrowonblacktights,boots,a Lulu-knockoff pleated tennis skirt, a halter-top that makes my tits look good, and a zip-up acrylic sweater from Mango that I pluck the pills off of with my fingers.

I am as close to godly as I can be. I am pure. I am lovable. I amexhausted.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Mr. Korgy's wife is not beautiful but she's waiflike and linen-clad which is close enough.

"We'rejustsohappytohaveyou,Waldo,"shesays,gracefullywigglingherwristsoher braceletfallsfurtherdownit."Iknoweight'salittlelatefordinner,butwejustwantedtomake sure Greggy was in bed so we could actually be present with you."

"Thanks for havingme."

She sets two big wooden bowls on the table - one filled with rice, the other with meatballs - andagustofheraurahitsmeintheface.Thefemininesimplicity.Thetranquildomesticity.Th calm. It's foreign to me, this level of okayness. Even in someone like Frannie, who tries to pretend they've got it all together, I sense the thread they're hanging on by, the anxiety ticking under the hood. But not with Gwen.

Gwen's ease is real. It's in her gestures - the fluid way she sets down a bowl or tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear. It's in her voice - the soothing, buttery tone of someone who meditates twice a day and knows how to set a boundary without triggering the person on the receivingendofit.Itevencarriesthroughtoherskin-makeupless,gleaminglikearichladyon vacation who just finished an expensive facial and perused the gift shop on the way back, droppingamortgageamountofmoneyonavitamin-Cserumandaceramide-packedeyecream that she'll only dab under her eyes with her ring fingers to ensure optimum delicateness.

Ienvyherease.Itmakesmefeelstupidfortryingsohard.Forputtinginsomucheffort.Izip my sweater up higher and pretend to scratch my cheeks so I can rub out my

blush.

“Let’sdigin,”shesays asshesetsdown aplateofsteamingdinner rollsandasaladbowl.

*OceanofPDF.com*

I hang back to watch her first, to gauge how big of a portion is appropriate, how many meatballs or scoops of rice a graceful person goes for. It turns out to be five and two, respectively,soIfollowsuitwhilewemakesmalltalkabouttheweatherandthedriveoveran how hectic it is to have a toddler.

Korgy is surprisingly quiet. Subdued even. Only chiming in with occasional tag-ons to whatever Gwen says. At first I wonder if he's having an off day, in a bad mood or whatever, but afterthenineortenthtag-onIrealizethatthisisjustwhoheisaroundher.Thisistheirdynamic. She's in charge and he's second-in-command.

"The meatballs are amazing," I say at the first lull, almost impressing myself with thetiming.

Gwen thanks me, touching her heart inearnest.

"It'sTeddy'sfavoriteofmyspecialties,righthoney?"

"That's right," he chuckles, but I detect a fleck of embarrassment. Does it unsettle him that I'mseeinghimthisnewway? Notasapassionate,authoritativeman,alternatelytheatricaland composed, but as a submissive, emasculated one, shriveled and passive. His light dimmed.

"Itwasourthirddate,"Gwenythsays,puckeringherlipsasshelaunchesintoastoryshe's clearly excited to tell. "Teddy tried cooking for me, sweet thing that he is. He was trying to make— oh what was it you were trying to make, Teddy?"

"Chickenpiccata."

"Chicken piccata, that's what it was," she says, snapping, as if she didn't know, but I have a feeling that she did, that this is one of their most heavily-rotated stories, the kind that every couple collects after they've been together for a while. The kind that can carry them through social gatherings without

either of them having to do the grunt work of reflection, or forming a newopinion,orreallyseeingeachother.Insteadtheyjustpopacoininthejukeboxandletitrip

*OceanofPDF.com*

oneof“theirstories”-

thelinesrehearsed,thebeatsmemorized,thesharedglancesevenapart of the act.

“Thatthingwasburnttoacrisp,”shelaughs.“Gave‘blackened’awholenewmeaning,rig

“Suredid,”hesays,knowinghisline,onlythere’salittleheatonit.Maybehedoesn’tlike

thisstoryanymore.Maybehe’stiredofit.Orhe’soutgrownit.Orhewantstotellanewone.

Gwendoesn’tpickuponhisheat,orshedoesbutshechoosesnottoacknowledgeit,andI’

not sure which is worse.

“So I go, ‘Teddy, I like you a lot, but I don’t like you enough to eat this,”

she says. “We

laughedandlaughed.ThenItoldhimheshouldletmemakesomethingforhiminstead.AndI

made him these meatballs. He ate every bite. Nearly licked his plate. I said,

‘How long has it been since you last ate?!’”

Gwenlaughs. Korgylaughs. Ilaugh. Ha haha haha, sofunny.

“...Butenoughaboutus,we’reboring,”Gwensays.“Iwannahearabout*you*,Waldo.I’m

curious about you. Where you’re from, what you’re passionate about…”

“Uhh,bornhereinAnchoragetoacoupleofhighschoolstudents.Or,mymomthoughtth

were high school sweethearts. My dad thought of her more as a fuck buddy.”

“Oh,” Gwenyth says, her eyes widening like she’s never heard the

word ‘fuck’ before. “Then I was born and my mom guilted my dad

into sticking around for a bit until, aftera

couple years, the guilt stopped working and he left. Since then, it’s just been

me and Mom.” “Okay,okay,”Gwensaysinthatoverly-

politemaskingtonemeanttowardoffdiscomfort

and keep ushering the conversation forward the way it’s supposed to go, on

the safe path of

smalltalkandsocialniceties.Shetakesabiteofameatball.“Andwhatdoesyourmotherdo?”

OceanofPDF.com

“Bags groceries atSafeway.”

Gwen takes a long sip of wine and for the first time I sense a nervousness bleeding through.

Thereisnosafepathwithme,nopaththatallowsustoglossovertheuncomfortablerealitieso my life, or better yet, avoid them entirely. She fiddles with the stem of her glass and I know it should be on me to dig us out of this hole, but I don’t want to. A sick part of me is enjoying watching her squirm. Not know what to do with this moment. The woman of ease, uneasy.

“WellIloveSafeway,”shefinallysays,“Thebakerycaseisquitetasty,righthoney?”“Ye

Shethrowsanalmost-

undetectableglanceof“helpmeouthere”agitationatMr.Korgy,but he doesn’t pick up on it, or he does but he chooses not to acknowledge it.

Iaskwheretheymet,andtheyanswerinunison.“College.”

“Iwasasenior,hewasasophomore.Ireallyrobbedthecradlewiththisone!”Gwenythsay clearly hitting another punchline she’s hit before. It makes me uncomfortable. Mr. Korgy gives me a discreet look that feels reassuring, like he’s trying to tell me that he’s uncomfortable too.

ThatheseesthismomentthesamewaythatIdo,thathesharesinmyjudgment.Andwhatis connection, really, if not shared judgment?

“Wow,sincecollege,”Isay,“Soyouguyshavebeentogetherfor–”

“–Sixteen years,” Gwen nods, covering her mouth as

she chews.

Isay“wow”,embellishingitinawaythatIknowI’msupposedto,andthenaskthefollow up question I know I’m supposed to ask.

“What’syoursecret?”

OceanofPDF.com

“Communication,” Gwen says, as if she believes it’s something noteworthy and poignant eventhoughit’sthemoststockanswerI’veeverfuckingheard.Communication? That’sit?How about a modicum of perspective, Gwen? How about a teaspoon of point of view?

“Anythingelse?”IaskdirectlytoMr.Korgy,egging.Buthedoesn’tanswer.

Gwen wipes her mouth with a napkin as she thinks.

“Well,yeahactually,”shesays.“Thewhole‘oppositesattract’thinghelpsusoutalot.We complement each other, you know? I’m the practical one, he’s a dreamer.”

Shegivesthefaintesteye-rollontheword“dreamer”,aneye-rollmeanttocomeoffas good-natured teasing but that I can sense the resentment underneath.

“Althoughhe’scomin’tothedarksideofpracticality,”shesays,winkingathim.“Ihaven had to hear about his dystopian future novel in years.”

Teddynods,tryingtoforceanunbotheredacknowledgement,butheshiftsinhischair.

“Whydoyouask,Waldo?

Doyouhaveyoureyeonacuteboyatschool?”Gwenasks. “Not really.”

“Nobody?”Gwenasks.“Comeonnn,prettygirllikeyou? Theremustbesomebodyyou wanna get to know a little better.”

“Well,Iguessthereissomebody…”

Ilookdownatmyfingernails,thenupagain,involuntarilyrightatMr.Korgy.Hequickly averts his eyes, but not quickly enough for the shared millisecond of a look not to havehappened.

“Mommy? I had anightmare…”

OceanofPDF.com

WeallturnandseeGregorytuckedbehindthestaircasebanister.He'sinhisracecarpajan
nappyheaded and clutching a blanket and looking as pale as if he did, in fact,
just witness amonster.

"Aww,sweetheart,mommy'scoming,"Gwensays.Shesetshernapkinonthetableandg
me an apology face. "I'll be quick, you wait to answer til I'm back. I don't
wanna miss anythinggood."

She gets up and crosses toward Gregory as he extends his arms up to her.
She heaves him
ontoherbonyhipandwhispersinhisearuntilhestartstogiggle.IturnbacktofaceMr.Korgy
as she walks up the rest of the stairs.*Step. Step.*

"We'rehappywecouldhaveyouover,"Mr.Korgysays.

*Step.Step.*

"I'm happy you invited me," Isay.

*Step.Step.*

And then we just look at each other. Neither of us saying a word. Just
staring. Until the
footstepsdisappear.Andwekeepstaring.Iwanttobebold,tocrouchunderthetableandcraw
toward him on my knees and rub my hands up his legs until his cock starts
to stir. I want to unzip his pants to free it, and watch it spring up toward me
like it needs me, like he needs me. I want to trace it up and down with my
tongue, teasing it, and kiss it until he starts to shake with pleasure. I want to
look deep into his eyes while I suck him off, sucking the sadness from him
and turning it into something better.

ButinsteadItakeabiteofmeatball.

"Gwen's

great," I say.

“Sheis,isn’tshe?”heagrees.

OceanofPDF.com

“Sheis,”Isay.“Shereallyis.”

Andthenherfootstepsstartagainasshebroundsdownthestairsandfinallywebreakeye contact. Mr. Korgy clears his throat.

“He’sfine,justneededagoodtuck-in,”Gwensays,takingherseatagain.“Nowwerewe? Ohyeah,youweretellingusaboutacuteboyatschool,rightWaldo?”“Right.”

“Wellyougottagoforit,girl!”Gwensays,playfullyswattingmeontheshoulder.

“I-I can’t exactly…”

“Oh,he’sgotagirlfriend?”

I

hesitate.

“Sort

of…”

Mr.Korgypaysspecialattentiontohissalad.

“Goodthingis,inhighschool,girlfriendscomeandgo,”Gwensays,hereyesglistening. “You’re next in line, I bet.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

*Mr.Korgy-*

*Justwantedtosendaquickemailandthankyoufordinnertheothernight.PleasetellGwenth*
*was delicious. I liked learning more about the two of you and your*
*relationship. It inspired me. I hope to someday find someone I can look at the*
*way Gwen looks at you. Maybe I'll try with the boy at school. ;)*

*Thanksagain,Waldo*

*P.S.907-335-8697*

*OceanofPDF.com*

ThefirsttimeMr.Korgycallsme,Frannie'sdadisinthemiddleofThanksgivingprayer.

MyphonebuzzesinmypocketwhileMr.Hickledroneson,blessingthedayandthefamil and the health and the meal, listing each specific food on the table. "Thank you for this cranberry sauce, these mashed potatoes, my personal favorite: the stuffing…" Then I feel the buzz of a text. Then another. I sneak a glance. The first:*It's Mr. Korgy.*The second:*Are youfree?*

IexcusemyselfandrushthroughtheMarthaStewartlivingroom,pasttheimmaculately decorated fireplace with its holiday knick-knacks and fresh balsam garland. I duck into the bathroom at the end of the hall.

Mr. Korgy tells me he wanted to check in and make sure I've got some place nice to spend myholiday.Itellhimmymom'swithherboyfriendsoI'mwithmyfriend'sfamilyuptown,a that it's nice to have a home-cooked meal and be in a house where the toilets work, but that I don't really feel much of a connection with anyone here and that I secretly can't wait to leavesoon.

HeaskswhenIfeelthemostconnectedinmylifeandIthink"rightnow"butIsay"when I'm writing" because I assume that's what he wants to hear. He seems pleased. I feel proud.

I ask him when he feels the most connected in his life and he says when he's writing, too, although he hasn't in so long. I ask him about the dystopian future novel that Gwen mentioned. He chuckles and tries to downplay it, but I can tell that it means something to him, and that he might even be proud of it, or at the least the half of it that he says is tucked somewhere in a drawer,dog-earedandpaper-clippedwithnoteshenevergotaroundto,waitingtobefinished.I

OceanofPDF.com

tellhimthatI'dlovetoreadit,thatheshouldstartitupagain,setasideanhouradaytofinishit. He says he appreciates the encouragement, but that he won't make any promises because he doesn't make promises he can't keep.

We talk about our favorite Thanksgivings. I tell him about the time Mom kept complaining the chicken was taking forever to cook and then realized the oven was broken. She started freakingout,callingthelandlord,andhewasn'tanswering,thenhefinallydidandsaidwithth holidayhecouldn'tcomeoutforacoupledays.AndsuddenlyMomwasdeadquiet.Calmeve Serene. She knew there was no chance we were having that roast chicken so there was no use trying.Inthatmoment,shemadegivinguplooklikeagoodthing.Wemadeasheetfortandate peanut butter and banana sandwiches until our stomachs ached. It was a great night.

Mr.Korgytellsmeaboutthetimehisfamilywentcamping,andhowtheymades'moresa wentswimminginthelakeandhowhewenttotakealeakandgotlostinthewoodsforanhour. He says he didn't feel panicked at all. Ten years old and felt comfortable with being lost.

"IwishIfeltthatcomfortablewithbeinglostnow,"hesayswithasubtleslurtohiswords.I askhimwhathemeansbythatandhesaysitmustjustbethewhiskeytalking,thathe'shadone too many, and he apologizes, and I remind him not to.

I ask him what he's doing on Thanksgiving alone, in a tone that I hope doesn't sound too presumptuous, and he tells me he doesn't usually do holidays with Gwen. That there's tension withherfamily.Thathermomdoesn'tlikehim.Aprotectiveangerswellsinmychest.Iwantt call her a stupid cunt.

"Gwenwaswitharealcatchbeforeme,"hesays."Afinanceguy.Kindaguywhodresses

sharp and has a sharp haircut. Just sharp all around. Angular. And Gwen's mom loved him. Sobbed after their breakup. Still calls him on holidays. Gwen begs her mom not to call him.

*OceanofPDF.com*

She'ssoembarrassed.Butshecan'tstopher.Meanwhile,theladysnarlsatmewheneverIhav to see her for even five minutes. Told me once, to my face, 'my daughter deserves better.'"

"She soundsunstable."

"Sheis.Doesn'tmake ithurtanyless."

Andthenitcomes.Thelullthatsignifiesthatwe'vearrivedattheendoftheconversation and it's time to wrap up. I hear the Hickles group-laugh at something in the other room as a hungry urge pushes itself up on me with such intensity that I don't have time to edit it.

"Wellhey,"Iblurtout,"IfyouwantcompanywhileGwen'souttatown,wecouldmeetup Go on a walk orsomething…"

Theofferhangsintheairforasecond,thekindofsecondwhereafullfour-coursemealof emotions is devoured within it. Regret, then nervousness, then anticipation, then dread.

"Shoot,Waldo,youknowwhat,Ishouldprobablyberesponsible.I'vegotalotonmyplat with Gwen out of the house. Chores and errands and work. In fact, I should probably jump off now to go take care of some of it. But it's been great talking with you."

Thewallisundeniable.Awallthatwasn'ttheresecondsbefore.AwallthatIcaused.By pushing too far. By asking for too much.

"Sure,"Isay.Andweexchangegoodbyesandhehangsupand Igodeadinside.

I wash my hands to buy time to compose myself. The water gets scalding and the soap suds fillupthesink.Ipumpanothersoapglobintomyhand.Malin +Goetz.Inthishouse,evensoap is a status symbol.

"Sorryaboutthat.Mymom,"Isay,sittingbackdownatthedinnertable,reekingof eucalyptus and rejection.

OceanofPDF.com

“Ohnoworries,sweetie,gladshecalled,”Mrs.Hicklesays.“Andperfecttimingactually were just going around the table saying what we’re grateful for. Your turn.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

**NEW CHAPTER (ALL CHAPTER #S AFTER WILL BEAFFECTED)**

And now for the shamereturns.

AssoonasIgethomefromFrannie's,IgraballtheTargetproductsfrommybeautytripplu a few striped baby tees and a teddy jacket that were impulse purchases from a previous Target binge, throw them all back in the bag, then hurl the bag into the front seat of my car next to an old Burger King cup and a pack of melted Listerine strips.

It's embarrassing every time I make a return. Every time I have to confront the gaping disparity between what I thought could be and what actually is. I can always see in the employee's eyes that they know it too.*Oh, that top didn't work out?*Is the nice way of saying*Youfuckingpieceofshit,you'reafuckingretardifyouthoughtthatblousewasgonnam in your shitty little life. Fucking dumbass.*

Thistimeit'sevenworse.I'mnotjustmakingthesereturnsbecauseIoverspentoraccepte that I don't need a linen tank top in Alaska or a fifth pair of poorly made leggings that disintegrate by the fourth time in the wash. I'm not making these returns because I don't want*them*. I'm making these returns because*he*doesn't want*me*. And I need to blame someone. Something. So I blame them. I believed them. I believed every last marketing ploy. Every discount,everylimitedtimeoffer,everyscarcitytactic(onlyafewleft!).IbelievedIcouldbe bouncier, suppler, glossier, shinier, dewier, skinnier, breezier, glowier. I believed I could be better. But now I know better. And the return has to be made.

IpullintotheTargetlot.It'smostlyemptyandIstupidlythinkit'sbecauseThanksgivingi
low-crowd day, then I get to the locked double-doors and see the hanging
sign. CLOSED FORTHANKSGIVING.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Idumpthebagsbackinmycarandheadtoa7-11,whichisopen,trueAmericanherothatit is. I get a frozen Coke slurpee and a pack of brown sugar cinnamon Pop Tarts and a sack of ranch Corn Nuts and eat them all simultaneously in the near-empty parking lot.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Peopleclawandelbowtheirwaystothe80%offpantybar.Theroberackisscrapedclean and where this morning there was a full-sized Christmas-tree shaped display of 3-for-1 body butter jars, there is now only the sad and dirtied tree skirt that laid underneath them.

BlackFridayinanyretailstoreisthebestcasestudyofconsumerbehavior,aterrifyingpee into how much pain one human is willing to inflict on another human to save five bucks on a lotion with glitter in it. I usually enjoy the people watching in a sick sort of way, but today I can't. I'm exhausted. Only got two hours of sleep last night. Couldn't find a comfortable position. Couldn't stop the looping thoughts. Why'd I have to cross over that invisible line we were toeing by asking him to hang out one-on-one like a fucking twelve-year-old in the lunch room? I spooked him. I spoiled it. And now I've lost him.

"Hi, doll! Happy BlackFriday!"

Weaving through the crowd of hysterical women pawing for thongs with their gooey Cinnabon fingers, Mom rushes toward me in all her glory, arms overflowing with bras and bustiersandlingerieslipsthatshecan'tafford.Shekissesmeonthecheekanddumpsherthing into a fitting room, hangers clanging against each other, bra-straps getting tangled.

"Iwantedtostopbyandseeya,"shesays."AndthenIwashopingIcoulduseyourdiscount

Shesiftsthroughherpileofbrastoaverthereyesfromme,untanglingthebrasandlaying them straight on their hangers.

OceanofPDF.com

"Don't look at me like that, like I'm using you or something," she says. "Even with your discount, I could find cheaper places. You think JCPenney doesn't have a cheap, decent bra? You're dead wrong."

"I'm sure JCPenney has lots of good bras."

"They do. They really do…"

She pulls the curtain shut behind her and flings it open again once she's wearing the first look - a white chiffon slip with black polka dots.

"You hate it, I can see by your nose-scrunch," she says. "Well don't try and stop scrunching now that I called it out. I saw. I can't unsee."

She wooshes the curtain shut and changes into the next one. A baby doll style with a gaudy floral print.

"I thought you didn't like floral prints."

"Well I don't, but Tony does," she says. "People always say that bullcrap about how it shouldn't matter what the guy thinks is sissexy, that you should dress for yourself or whatever, but the truth is, I feel sexy when I'm *his* ideal version of me. I feel like my best self when I'm what *he* I get that's not healthy, but waddaya want, health or honesty?"

She strikes a pose no mother should ever strike for her daughter, a pop-star-album-cover kind of pose - ass shoved out, back arched, seductive mouth-gape, bedroom eyes.

"It's bad," she answers for me, then yanks it off and shuts the curtain to try on the next one. A barely-there cherry red bikini set. The bottom, a stringy thong. The top, a

push-up that hikes her breasts up and shoves them together.

“Better,right?”sheasks.Inod.Shepeelsitoffandchucksitinhershoppingbasket.

“When in doubt, let those tits hang out, right hun?”

*OceanofPDF.com*

Myphonebuzzes.*Finishedupsomeworkabitearlierthanexpected…*

*ifyoustillwanttogoon that walk?*

*OceanofPDF.com*

A quick lie to my boss, a speeding drive home, a cloud of perfume, a flurry of clothes, and countless creams, lotions, liquids, and powders later, and now, finally, I'm here. The curdled dread from two hours ago has vanished and been replaced with a glowy euphoria as I walk towardMr.Korgy.AsIfloattowardhiminmycinchedpufferandleggings,hopingtoshowof my figure as best as I can in the frigid weather.

"HeyWaldo,how'sitgoing?"heasks,throwingthetailofhisflannelscarfoverhisshould

"I'm good, how are you?"

"Prettygood,prettygood.Happytoseeyou."

"Happy to see you too."

I debate going in for a hug but the moment passes and the window of opportunity closes. We starttomakeourwaydownthecoastaltrail.HeasksmeaboutmyfutureandIaskhimabouthis past.There'ssomethingaboutitthatdevastatesme,intheassumptionthatmylifeisaheadofm and his is behind him. That twenty years is the difference between a life that's considered yet to be lived and one that's considered over.

I tell him that I haven't really thought much about my future, and his eyes fade with disappointmentthewayFrannie'sdidwhenweweremakingvisionboardslastNewYear'sE (her idea, not mine). Hers was filled with cut-outs from LDS magazines - happy families, cute dogs,theBrighamYoungUniversitycampus,BookofMormonpassages,prettywhitetemp crisp tradwife dresses, and arbitrary quotes meant to evoke positivity but that for me evoke a

vaguesenseofdoom:“You’vegotthis!”and“Keepgoing!”and“Youcandoanything,butyo
don’thave to doeverything!” By thetime she’d finishedher collage, I’dbarely
glue-stickedthe

OceanofPDF.com

backsof aLunchables magazinead andsome picturesof JeffProbst.

"Waldo,you'renottakingthisseriously,"shesaid."Yououghtacareaboutyourfuturem Yououghtagiveitsomethought."

I later asked mom for her point of view on the subject, if she thought I should start prepping my college applications and brainstorming career options, or even just not blowing every paycheckonBBcremeandpleatherjacketsthatneedtooff-gasforthreedaysbeforeIcanbein their vicinity without gagging.

"Oh,pleaseWaldo,"shesaidwithawaveofherhand."Collegeisatrap."

"You think?"

"For you? Yes. It's a trap. You're too you for college. College is for people who fit molds. Systems. Boring people who can wear uniforms and rehash the same three sentences as water coolerconversationandbeokaywiththatfortherestoftheirlives.Bringacreamcheeseballto the Christmas party, get two drinks deep, do a karaoke duet of*I Wanna Dance with Somebody*with their co-worker and call*that*wild. You're a different kind of wild. An actual wild. You've got a lot in you. You're bursting at the seams. You're unique. You're creative. An artist, if you askme.Andanartistsureashelldoesn'tfitintosystemsorneatlittlecookiecuttermolds.Nah. College wouldn't serve you."

Thenshetoldmethatit'simportantIliveinthepresent.Tostayyoungaslongas Ipossibly

"Anddon'tstopbuyingthosefakeleatherjacketseither,"sheadded."Theylookrealcute you, with the boxy fit, you'd never know they were poly-whatever."

I know both Mom and Frannie meant well, but being told I don't take things seriously enough fromthepersonwhotakeseverythingseriously,orbeingtoldtostayyoungfromthepersonw

OceanofPDF.com

nevergrewup,doesn’tquitecarrytheweightthattheywantitto.Youcanneverreallybelieve someone if all they’re telling you is to be the same as they are.

“Well,ifyoueverwannatalkmoreaboutyourfuturewithsomebody,brainstormaboutit I’m here,” Mr. Korgy smiles.

IlearnthatMr.KorgyisfromFlorida,justoutsideofhot,humidOrlando.Aplaceironicall called Winter Garden. He could see the Disney World fireworks from his backyard. His family even had passes.

Iaskifhegetsbackoften-hedoesn’t-ifhe’sstillclosewithhisparents-heisn’t-andifhe has any siblings - he pauses.

“Noactually,I,uh,hadalittlesister.”

I settle into the significance of the “had” as we pass an older woman with gray hairand

head-to-toeworkoutgear,sweatbandandall.She’ssmilingrightintothesun,likeshe’swalking straightoutofaposteradonadoctor’sofficewall.Anadforapillwithanamethat’ssupposed to make menopausal women feel like themselves again. Wyestra or Winlevia or Estrozen.

“Haveagoodday!”shesaysoverhershoulder.Someday,Iwilltrythatpill.

IaskMr.Korgywhenhissisterdiedandhetellsmehewassixteenandshewasfifteen,that she had lots of friends and straight-A’s and a bright future.

“Freakaccidentsneverhappentoburnouts,”hesays.“Alwaystothepromisingones.The photogenic ones.”

He’stheonewhofoundher.Heknockedonherbedroomdooronenightfordinnerandshe didn’t come out.

“I’llneverforgetwhatwasfordinnerbecauseitwasherfavorite,ricebowlsthatmymom

OceanofPDF.com

Heheardtheshowerrunningsoheknockedlouder,andlouder,andlouder,theneventuall went into her bedroom and started knocking on her bathroom door, and yelled her name, but there was no response. So he opened the door and saw her there, splayed out on the ceramictiles.

"Momnevermadericebowlsagain,"hesays.Thenhelooksupatatreeandpretendsto scratch his eye, and says that he shouldn't have said all that. That it's not appropriate for a student. I tell him it's fine and that I'm glad he did, I'm glad that he trusted me.

"I do," he says. "I do trustyou."

Hestopstotakemein,andItakehimin.Apairofoverlyaggressivecross-countryskiersjet past us, trying to prove how tough the workout is with their exaggerated huffs and puffs. And just like that, the moment is lost.

WekeepwalkingandIaskMr.KorgywhenAlaskahappened.HetellsmeGwen'sparent are an hour away, out in Palmer, and she wanted to be close to them.

"Wereyounervousaboutmovingtoaplacesodifferentfromhome?"

"Honestly,excited.We'dvisitedAlaskaafewtimesandwhenwedid,weexploredthewh state.HikedupinJuneau,tookacharterplaneouttoKetchikan.Ilovedthemountainrangesa the Northern Lights and the whale watching and the glaciers and all the natural wonders. But then once you move here, it's no longer a vacation, it's your life. And you stop exploring. And you realize, you don't live in Alaska, you live in Anchorage. Alaska is a monumental paradise, Anchorage is a sleepy town with no culture and barely a pulse, where the local music is bad and the local art is worse. The city lights drown out the Northern Lights, and you have to drive three hours to see a glacier."

OceanofPDF.com

We walk past a row of houses lining the trail, all with sprawling lawns and big pine trees. A coupleofthemalreadyhaveChristmaslightsup.Mr.Korgyaskswhichismyfavoriteandeve though I don't particularly like Christmas decorations I point to one and he says he prefers the one next to it.

"Moreclassic,"hesays."Givemeastringoflights,atastefullydecoratedtree,andI'mgo

ItrytomakeajokeabouttheoneIpointedtobutI'msecretlyfloodedwithembarrassment. Of course the girl who shops at Shein and eats frozen dinners six nights a week pointed to the housewiththeblow-ups.Ilovethatheknowsbetter,butIwishIdidtoo.IwishIknewhowto be tasteful. To not have the stink of white trashness trailing me wherever I go.

"Something the matter?" heasks.

"Ijust…wishIknewallthethingsthatyouknow,"Isay.

"Wellwe'reeventhen,"hesays,"BecauseIwishIknewallthethingsthatyouknow."

And then I slip on a patch of ice and he reaches his arm out to grab mine and keep me from falling, and I smell him, and I feel him, and my face surges with heat, and my ears burn even though my panting breath fills the air, and my heart pounds so fast I feel it in my throat, and beforeIevenknowwhat'shappeningI'mleaningtowardhim,mylipsgettingcloserandclos to his, until finally, they touch.

"Ohmygod,"hesays,pullingaway,handtohismouth.

"I'msorry.I'msosorry,"Isay,mythroatcatching."Ijustthought– Ithoughtbecause… you're so… nice to me. The way we talk, we have a… connection."

"Waldo,you'reseventeenandI'mmarriedandI'myourteacher,"hesayssternly.

OceanofPDF.com

“Iknow.Iknowthat.Butthewayyoulookatme.Thewayyoulookatmeis—youlookat me like you*see*me.*All*of me. I just felt like there was something between us.”

“Oh,Waldo,”hesays,aheavinesstakinghimover.“Idoseeyou.ButI’msorrytotellyou, you’re wrong about the nature of this dynamic. You’re very wrong.”

TheChristmaslightsblurastearswellinmyeyes.Iswallowthembackdown.It’snotthat he’s telling me I’m wrong, it’s that I know I’m not.

“Iknowyoufeelsomethingtoo,”Isay.“Wedon’thavetodoanythingaboutit,justdon’tli to me. Tell me the truth.”

“I’mreallysorry,Waldo,butIamtellingyouthetruth.Iknowit’snotthethingyou’dliket hear, but it’s the truth.”

A suckerpunch to my gut. I can’t breathe. I see my car up ahead in the distance and start walking toward it, then as the shame festers it catapults me into a sprint. As if I can run it off.

Runofftheshameofbeingfoolish.Anddelusional.Andunaware.Andnaive.Theshameofm limitations. My perspective. My desires. I get in my car and cry, then shove my key into the ignition. The engine sputters.

“Goddamnit,”Isay,givingitanothershove.Itsputtersagain.Andthenitfizzlesout.

*OceanofPDF.com*

The inside of Mr. Korgy's car isn't what I expected. I figured it'd be spotless. That it would smell clean. That there'd be copies of plays at the foot of the passenger seat, a fancy portable diffuserinthecarliketheNestoneFrannie'smomuses.Insteadit'smessy.Crayonmarksonth seats, cheerio grinds in between the cushions, greasy handprints on the windows, the smell of spilled milk from ages ago. It's the furthest thing from alluring or sexy, but still, I appreciate the level of intimacy. The peek behind the curtain of his life.

He's letting me sit in here while I wait for Triple A but despite the nice gesture, he's making it very clear this is only out of necessity. He hasn't said a word, or even looked at me, so I've donethesame,bothofsittingnexttoeachother,keepingoureyesawayfromeachother,starin straight ahead, wet and shivering from the melting snow.

Finally,Ican'ttakethesilenceanylonger.

"IwishIcouldtakeitback,"Isay."WhatIdid."

"TripleAshouldbehereanyminute,"hesays,anunfamiliarcoldnessinhistone.

I scratch my wrist and Mr. Korgy traces his finger along the steering wheel.

"Are you gonna report this?" Iask.

HelooksatmewithagraveexpressionI'veneverseenhimmakebefore.There'ssomethi about seeing someone make an expression you've never seen them make that can feel exciting, like you found the key to a secret passageway. Unless the look is this one. This you-wouldn't-understand,sympatheticsmilewithnocondescension,whichsomehowmakesit

worse.Thispersondoesn’tpatronizeyou,theyjusthavealotoflifeexperiencethatyoudon’t

Lifeexperiencethatgivesthemaperspectiveyoucouldn’tpossiblyfathom.They’retheadu

You’re the child.

OceanofPDF.com

“No,I’mnotreportingthis,”hesays,shakinghishead.“I’mnottellinganyoneaboutthis.I
anyone found out, I’d get fired.”

“Butyoudidn’t doanything wrong…I cameontoyou–”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m the adult. I should’ve seen this coming. I’m more
than twice your age
andI’myourteacher.Ishouldn’thaveinvitedyoutodinner.Ishouldn’thavegoneonthewalk
shouldn’t have engaged at all. End of story.”

“You’renotavillain.”

“WellIpromiseyouthat’snotwhatanyoneelsewouldthink.”

“Whocareswhatotherpeoplethink?
Peoplearemostlystupidanyway,andtheydon’tthink for themselves, they just
regurgitate headlines and buzzwords and the point of view of the peoplethey
followon Instagram. Iwould’ve thought youdidn’t care aboutwhat
peoplethink.”

“Waldo,please,”hesaysastheTripleAcarturnsontotheroad,itsbrightheadlightsblurre
in the snowy windshield. “Enough.”

OceanofPDF.com

Itakeacabhome.ItsmellslikeSlimJimsandcigarettes.Thedriverisonthephonewithhis wife the entire time, arguing. He berates her. She cuts him down.

There are some old unbranded hard candies in the cupholder next to me. I unwrap one and popitinmymouthandchompdown,thentakeafistfulofthemandshovetheminmypockets. I'm gonna have to return a lot of shit to pay for this cab ride. Least I can do is get some free sugar out of it.

The cabbie pulls up to my place and puts the phone onmute.

"Feelbetter,"hesaysoverhisshoulder,theninstantlyunmutesandgoesbacktoberatingl

As I open the door I'm hit with a wave of the thick, oversaturated scent of a Bath and Body Works three-wick candle. Mahogany Coconut. So Mom's got a guy over. I try to beeline to my room.Idon'thavethespaceforconversationrightnow.IonlyhavethespaceforrealityTVan online shopping and a family-size sack of salty potato chips, aka the poor man's lobotomy.

Anything to not have to feel. Or think. Sometimes I'm not sure which isworse.

Thebeelinedoesn'twork.

"Hi,hun!"Momshoutswiththemanicenthusiasmthattakesheroverwhenevershe's introducing a new man to me. "Didn't realize you'd be back so soon!"

"Hi," I say to Mom, ignoring her smeared lipstick and the man sitting next toher.

"Tony,thisismydaughter,Waldo,"shesays,laughingnervously."I'vetoldhersomuch about you!"

"Hey there," he says. "Good to meetya."

OceanofPDF.com

Tonythetruckdriverhasleatheryskinanddirtyfingernailsandanodordistinctenoughfo his own candle. Although I don't know who would fork out sixteen bucks for a scent called Tobacco and Dollar-Store Shampoo.

"Imadetacos,"Momsays."There'sleftoversinthefridgeifyouwannaheat'emupand come join us."

Mymouthhardens.It'sstupid.It'snotlikethrowinggroundbeefinapanisadifficultthing to do, but still, she's never done it for me. I want to scream at her. I want her to hug me.

"Goon,sweetheart,"shesays."45secondsshoulddoit.Don'twant'emburningyour tongue.Thenwecanallplayaboardgameorsomethin'.ThinkI'vegotClueinacabinetsome

Tonycoughsawadofphlegmintoatissueandsetsitonthecoffeetableforoneofusto clean up later.

"Actually,Iwasjustabouttoheadout,"hesays.

Hebrusheshisjeansoffashestands,andMom'seyesflickerlikeadeerabouttobestruck by a car. "But I-I have dessert for us."

"WellthatsoundslovelybutIdon'tgotmuchofasweettoothanyhow,darlin'."

"It's just some cupcakes from Safeway. They're really not that sweet."

"I'mquitealright,thanksthough,littlelady.'Preciatetheoffer."Hepeckshercheekandp on his coat.

"Oh,okaythen,"Momsaysasevenlyasshecan.ButIhearthelumpinherthroat.Shetugs on her necklace as Tony opens the door. "I'll save you one for next time!"

"Sounds good. And nice meeting you,Wanda!"

*OceanofPDF.com*

The door slams. I heat up some tacos while Mom turns on *The Bachelor* and we split a cupcake while we watch. One of the contestants is upset that she didn't get enough time to talk with the guy, who looks like a walking wax figure. Mom checks her phone every thirty seconds for a text that isn't there, then every forty seconds, then every minute, then every five, the hope slowly draining out of her until, by the time we're reaching the end of the third episode of the night, her hope has been replaced with the sad droning of acceptance.

"You alright, sweetheart?" she asks as we watch another brokenhearted girl climb into the back of a Cadillac Escalade, roseless and rejected and weeping about how he was "the one". They're always so sure "the one" is the one who doesn't want them.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I say, eyes glued to the TV with that faraway TV glaze. "You?"

"Yeah, I'm fine too," she says, her eyes glued just the same.

*OceanofPDF.com*

A pair of gorgeous, magazine-worthy girls gossip at the sink mirrors and apply no-makeup makeup because why wouldn't they? No-makeup makeup works if you don't need makeup. If you'vegotporcelainskinandeyessetsowidethey'reonoppositehemispheres.Istudythegi withgrotesqueintriguethroughthecrackinthebathroomstalldoor.Loathingthem.Wantin be them.

I sit on that line that so many sit on, the line between beautiful and not. The line where I can reachitonagoodday,duringthefollicularphaseofmycycle,ifIdidn'tsleeponmyface,with just the right amount of plucking and primping and a precise swath of eyeliner. It's the line that keeps me even more stuck in the hamster wheel of the pursuit of beauty. Even more dependent on makeup tutorials and tips-and-tricks videos and "that perfect cream bronzer". Because anything could be the thing that makes the difference between me being beautiful or not.

Iwhipacompactmirroroutofmypocketandpulloutmytinyweapons,swipingandglidi andbrushingmywaytoabetterselfnotwiththecasualflicksanddaintydabsofflippancy,like it's a fun little hobby, but the way anyone less than gorgeous does - with urgency, with desperation, my self-esteem hinging on whether or not I'm able to nail that cat eye or that feather technique with the mascara or get my foundation smooth and not cakey. A desperation that hides the true feeling underneath it.

Rage.RagethatIwasbornwithdarkcirclesandhairthatwon'tbehave.Rosaceathatburs whenI'dleastlikeittoandacnethatneverstopsflaringonatleastonepatchofmyface.Rage that he doesn't want me. And that maybe he would if I didn't have dark

circles or rosacea or

acne.Iknowthattherearеplentyofothermoreobviousobstacles.He’smyteacher.He’sgota

OceanofPDF.com

wifeandakidandafullybakedlife.Still,Ican'thelpwondering.Istherealevelofbeautyone canreachwheretheybecomeundeniablywanted? AndamIonelipstainshadeawayfromthat level? Spicy Sienna didn't work last time, but maybe Berry Queen will. I yank the tube out of my backpack and start swiping.

I head to class and take a seat toward the back, doodling in my notebook until my hand shakessobadlyIhavetostop.Oneminuteafter.Thentwo.Thedoorswingsopen.Myback shoots straight.

"Sorry I'm late," he says, shoving his glasses up the bridge of his hook-nose. "I'mMr. Condren.I'llbeyoursubstituteteacherwhileMr.Korgyisaway."

Ichewoffmyhangnail,spititontothefloor,andsuckthecoldmetal-ybloodfromthetipof my finger.

He'srepulsedbyme.Sorepulsedhehiredasubsohecouldavoidme.Clearhishead.Vent his wife over pot roast about what a dysfunctional, delusional kid I am.

Thenagain,ifhe'savoidingworkbecauseofme,thatdoesmeanIaffectedhim.Ihavethe power to affect him. That power, even just the possibility of it, feels good. Maybe the Spicy Sienna did work.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Theelephanttakesagiantshitnearthecornerofhishabitat,abigcementblockbuildinginthe far corner of the zoo. People “ooh” and laugh while recording on their iPhones.

“Areyouwatch-eenthis,Waldo?”Frannieasksoverhershoulder.

Shesharesaboxofbutteredpopcornwith Tristan, herlongtimeboyfriendfromchurchw has already said “God rocks” twice today. He has his arms wrapped around her and they occasionally pop a piece of popcorn in the other’s mouth.

“Canyousee,Waldo?”sheasksagain.“He’s–”

“Taking a giant shit, yeah, I

see,” I say.

Franniepullsalookatme,offended,andTristankissesthetopofherhead.Ican’ttellifthe timing is coincidental, just a habitual peck, or if the kiss is meant to soothe her from my “prickliness”,as if my use of the word “shit” might just upend her entire day and he needs to protect her from that. Protect her from me.

I’ve never liked Tristan. It’s not that he’s not nice to me. He is, though I can’t even count it becauseMormonsarenicetoeveryone.Nicebydefault.Youcan’ttallysomethingassomeo good quality if they believe that not possessing it would send them straight to hell.

It’sthathe’ssuchanon-person.Justavaguesuggestionofone.Ihavenoideawhohetruly is. Where he actually stands. Because all he ever does is throw on his best active-listener face and politely agree with whatever’s being said.

It doesn’t matter. I’m not here for Tristan. Or for Frannie. Or to stroll

through the aviary and

pointtocolorfulbirds.*Wow,lookatthatgoldenplumage.*I'mhereforthedistraction.Tofilln

*OceanofPDF.com*

timewithanythingsothatIcanattempttoescapethejaggedspearsofanxietythatgnawatme every day that I don't see him.

It's been seven days. Seven brutal, punishing days of a substitute teacher. Of attempting to eavesdrop on the conversations of other students in his class, hoping I'll hear about what the fuckisgoingon.Whyheleftsoabruptlyinthemiddleofaschoolyearwithnoexplanation,no warning.TwodaysagoIthoughtIheardVanessawhispersomethingabouthimtoDerek,but couldn't lean in close enough to get a good listen.

So I've been left with nothing. No clues. No clarity. No closure. Nothing. Just an indefinite void that I'm forced to fill by picking up extra shifts and spiraling down YouTube rabbit holes andshovelingMarieCallender'sentreesintomymouthandsavagelyclickingmywaythrou shopping sprees that lacerate my bank account.

"Yougood?"Frannieasks."Yes."

Tristanpullsherhairbehindhershouldersandkissesthebackofherneck.Thereitisagain Thehedge-against-my-attitudegesture.Theelephantissomehowstillshitting.Anunbelievable amount of shit.

I suck the sour sugar from the last remaining gummy bodies until my tongue is scraped raw. I'vealwaysderivedastrangepleasurefromthepainofjunkfood.Iceesvacuumedupthrough strawinlessthanaminutesothebrainfreezehitshard.Nachospackedwithsomanyjalapeno that my nose runs. Kettle chips heaped into my mouth, my hand like a claw excavator, forcing them in until their rugged edges cut my gums.

"Iwonderifshegetslonely."Tristannodstowardtheelephant,hisperfectlycoiffed Latter-Day Saint hair wobbling in the wind.

OceanofPDF.com

“Or she could just like her solitude,” Ishrug.

“Idunno…”Franniesays,pluckingapieceofpopcornfromthebox.“Solitudecanbegoo
but not a lifetime of it. At some point, you’ve gotta find connection
somewhere.”

ItiltbackthebagofSourPatchKidstoletthesoursugarpoolintomymouthanddissolve.I
no longer feel my tongue.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Top40hitsblarethroughtheloudspeakers.Girlsinsparklydressesdancewithboysinill-fitting suits. The girls are desperate for boyfriends. The boys are eager for sex. Randy Julep dances with a girl he looks like he cares about. Good for him. She has a prettier face than me but tinier tits. We can't have it all.

Istandofftotheside,watching,envelopedbyablanketofcatatonia.Ipreferanxietytothis At least anxiety is active. Has a sense of urgency to it. Feels alive and real, like it matters. This feels like nothing, like death.

It's the second week that I haven't seen him. I stayed after class a few days ago to get info from the hook-nosed sub. All he said was that he heard Mr. Korgy was out for "personal reasons." I tried to push as subtly as I could, to not sound desperate or obsessed, to keep the questions as standard as possible and my tone as even as possible. I asked if he'd heard if Mr. Korgywasokay,orwhenhewascomingback,butMr.Condrensaidtheydon'ttellhimmuch around here.

"I'm just a lowly sub," heshrugged.

Thenumbnesssettledin andhasn'tleftsince.

"Waldo,wouldyoutakeourpicture?"Frannieasks."Beforewegetallsweatyfromtheda

IsnapphotosofherandTristanflankedbyballoonarches,standinginfrontofabigbanner with*Winter Formal*scrawled across it in cursive. They look sweet and wholesome and an uncomfortable amount of related. Frannie scrolls through the pictures and asks me to take a

OceanofPDF.com

couplemoresothelighthitsTristanbetterbutit'sactuallysoshecanfavorthegoodsideshe pretends to be above having.

Eventually the air grows thick with sweat and hormones and the moves start to get more suggestive.Everyone'sgyratingexceptFrannieandTristan,wholeaveroomforJesusbetw them, which makes them look even more related.

"Mr.Korgy'sclass,right?"Ihearsomeonesay,loudabovethemusic.Iturntofaceatallbo with messy hair and floppy limbs who I only vaguely recognize due to his forgettable face - not unattractive but bland, like a packet of plain oatmeal.

"Uh,yeah,"Ishoutback.

"Nolan,"

he

says."Waldo."

"Kindaspooky,huh?"heasks."Thathe'sjustgone?Wheredoyathinkhewent?"

"Idon'tknow.Haveyouheardanything? Doyouhaveanyidea?"Iask,feelingmyeyesgowild.

"Nope,"hesayscasually."Jakesaidhemight'vekilledhimselfbutIwaslike,there'snow That'd be on the news for sure. Or at least in thenewspaper."

Mythroatclenches.Myfaceflusheswithheat.Itrytosteadymybreath,tonotlookas affected as I am by even the thought of it.

"Sowhyaren'tyoudancing?"Nolanasks."Cuzthemusic'sbadorcuzyourmovesarebac

"Ah,welldamnit.Ifitwascuzyourmovesarebad,Iwasgonnasuggestthatyoudancewith me, because your moves couldn't possibly be worse than mine."

"Toobadit'sboththen,"Ishrug.

OceanofPDF.com

“Youdoinganythingfunforwinterbreak?”

“Just working.”

“Ah,”henods,takingthehint.“WellIdon’twanttokeepyouifyou’rebusystandinghere alone staring at the walls.”

He walks away. I push open the double-doors and a heavyset chaperone asks where I’m headed,over-policingbecauseahighschooldanceistheoneplaceinhislifehegetstoexerciseauthority.

“Restroom,” I say over myshoulder.

“There’sacloseronetheotherway,”hesays,puffinghischest.

“I could use a walk.”

“Fine,” he says with an I’ll-allow-it nod. “But hurryback.”

Iturnatthe endofthehallway andkeepwalkinguntil Igettothe door.Hisclassroomdoor.

Insideit’sdark.ItellmyselfnottogoinbutIlookdownatmyhandandseethatit’salready twisting the doorknob.

I had hoped it would smell like him but instead it just smells like pencil shavings and chalk.

Likeanyordinaryclassroom.Not*his*classroom.Iwanttofeel*his*classroom.Iwanttofeel*him*

I touch his desk. His Bic pens. His earth-toned paper clips. His mechanical pencils. His Magic Rub erasers and bright yellow highlighters, his ruled paper and hole punchers and the paper circles that rain out from them. I touch the arms of his chair, caressing the balding leather that his elbows have rubbed against so many times. I lean down and breathe in the chair, then the back of the chair, and then the seat of it.

“Waldo?”

Hissilhouetteloomsinthedoorway.Hestepsforwardandletsthedoorshutbehindhim.

OceanofPDF.com

“Jesus Christ,

you scared

me...”

“Whatareyoudoinghere?”heasks.

“What

are*you*doing

here?”

“I’m here to catch up on work. I’m very behind. I’ve been gone for twoweeks.”

Hetakesasteptowardme.It’sconfident.Measured.Almostgraceful.He’scompletelyi

“Yourturn,”hesays,takinganothersteptowardme.“Whyareyouinmyclassroom,Wal

Idon’thaveananswerforhim.

“Youshouldgetbacktothedance,”hesays,histoneeven.

“I don’t want to go back to the

dance.”

“Youneedto.”

“Haveyoubeenavoidingme?”“What?”

“Is

that

why

you

disappeared?”

“It had

nothing

to do

withyou.”

“Why have you been gone then? Where have youbeen?”

“It’s…”hetakesadeepbreathandtakesmein,likehe’sdecidingsomethingaboutme. Whether or not he can share something with me. Whether I’msafe.

“Mydaddied,”hesaysfinallyasheleansagainsthisdesk.“Thetimingwas… sudden.But the cause wasn’t unexpected. He wasn’t in great health. Didn’t take care of himself.”

“Are you alright?” Iask.

“Yes,yeah,I’m– pushingthrough.Morethananything,Ineededtobethereformymom.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

Hepullsamechanicalpencilfromhiscupholderandclickstheerasertiprepeatedly."Nov
get back to the dance, alright?"

"CanIhugyoufirst?""What?"

"Youseemsad.Heavy.CanIhugyou?
ThenI'llgobacktothedance.Ijustwanttocomfort you. I want to help you feel
better."

He doesn't respond, which I take as a yes. I lean over to hug him but he doesn't move, so I lift his arms and extend them to wrap around me. His sweat stains bleed through the armpits of hisbutton-down.Irunmyhandsalonghisbackandrestmyheadonhischest,breathinghimin. We stay like this, suspended in each other's arms.

And then I feel him grow. Now I know. Undeniably. He wants me. Or at least his body does.
Maybehismindfeelsguiltyaboutit,tangledupinmoralsandsocietyandwhateverelse.Buth
body wants mine. And mine wants his. And bodies don't overthink and worry and analyze and doubt. Bodies just do.

Ipushhisshouldersdownsohesitsinhischair,thenIcrawlintohislapanddrapemylegs over his, straddling him.

"Waldo,getoffme."

"Ican't,"Isay,shakingmyhead.

"Please,

Waldo…"

"You'rehardforme,"Iwhisperintohisear.

Heleanshisheadback,agonytearingthroughhim.Heshutshiseyesandshootshisbreath
out,resisting,ortryingto,but hegrowsevenharder.Emboldenedby
hisbulge,Itracehisear.

OceanofPDF.com

Cuphisface.Runmyhandsthroughhishair.He'slinedupunderneathmeandthrobbingwith heat, desperate to be free. I reach down to help.

"No,no,"hesays.

"Please

let

me."

"No," he repeats, more sternly this time. He breaks away and touches his mouth, stunned. I grabhishandandputhisfingerinmymouthandsuckonitwhileIlookintohisbeautifulblue eyes. Into his sad, sad soul.

"Areyousureaboutthat,Mr.Korgy?"Iask,lickinghisfingerwhileIgrindonhimslowly. He'ssoharditalmosthurts.

"Yes.Yeah.I'm–Jesus,Waldo.I'msure.We…

can't,"hesays. "Look at me," I order, teasing

him with my rhythm.

"Waldo–"

"Aren'tyougonnalookatme,Mr.Korgy?"

"I- I can't," he says.

"Please, Waldo–"

"I

want

you to

look at

me."

"Waldo,pleasegetoffme

—"

“No,”Isay,rockingonhim.Pickingupmypace.“Justlikeyoucan’tlookatme,Ican’tget off of you. Because I see that you’re hurting and all I want is to make you feel good.”

Abeadofsweattricklesdownhisforehead.“Slowdown,Waldo.”

“Call me baby.”

“Slow down,baby.”

“WhatifItoldyouIcan’t? Ican’tslowdown.Iwantyoutoknowhowmuch Ineedyou,”I say, sliding myself down the length of him, then again, then again.

*OceanofPDF.com*

“I… need… you,” Iwhisper.

“Fuck…”hemoans,hisexpressionshiftingfromecstasytosurrendertoshock.

“Oh god,” he says. “Oh god.”

Asurgeofheat.Aconvulsion.Asmallwetpatchshinesthroughhiskhakis.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m so sorry.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

"I didn't know you had moves like that, darlin'…" Tristan says as he pulls up to a red light. "I took jazz classes in middle school," Frannie says, beaming. "Miss Gonzalez said I wasthe best in her class."

"I bet shedid."

"Yeah,thenshesufferedapsychoticbreakthatspringandhadtoquitteach-een.Sucha shame. No one taught fouettes like she did."

The light goes green and Tristan hits the gas. I'm in the backseat staring at a photo on Korgy'sInstagram,oneofhimataschooleventdressedinhissignaturecardiganandflanked other faculty members. He smiles, hands in his pockets. There he is, my teacher. The teacher I just dry humped until he came in his pants.

Itriedtogetareadonhimafterwardbutcouldn't.

"That was really… something," he said.

I tried to dissect it. The way he averted his eyes. Was it a bashful aversion, a coy one, an embarrassed one? Was the pause between the "really" and the "something" a good pause? A pauseofamazement? Of'weshoulddothisagain'?Orabadpause?Apauseofapprehension? Of regret?

Of shame?

"Yeahitwas,"Iagreed,eventhoughIdidn'tknowwhatIwasagreeingwith.

"Well, I've… made a mess," he said, looking down at himself timidly, the wet shine on his khakishavingbloomedoutwardevenmore.Iwantedtotouchthespot.Torubbackandfortho it.Tofeelthetackofhiscumbetweenmyfingers.Tolickitoffofthem.Ifeltstrangelyproudof

*OceanofPDF.com*

themessImade.ThatIdidthattohim.Thathedidthatforme.Theultimatepower.The ultimate surrender.

"I like the mess," Isaid.

HischeekswentredandIsawtheimprintofhispenisasitgrewhardagaininhispantsand he excused himself. I wanted to be bolder. To stop him at the door. To unbuckle his pants and climb onto him and bounce on him until I couldn't feel myself anymore. But instead I just watched him go, more and more uncertainty flooding me as his steps got further and further away until finally, they disappeared entirely. I was back in the auditorium before anyone had noticed I'd left.

"Ididn'tlikethatgirlRandywaswith,"Franniesaysoverhershouldertome."Shelooked mean, don't you think? Just had a mean look to her."

I mutter some form of agreement to get Frannie to move on as I click on a picture whereMr.

Korgy's holding a giant swirl of pink cotton candy that makes his blue eyes pop. And another

wherehe'sgotafacefullofshavingcreamandisliftingarazorupforthefirststroke,aphotoI imagine Gwen took.

Gwen.Iscrollpastthephotoswithherinthem,quicklyenoughtobarelycatchtheblurofh blond hair. I scroll past the ones with Gregory too, telling myself that if I knew them better,*then*I'd feel guilty. So guilty that I'd stop wanting him because I couldn't possibly hurt*them*likethat.

And then, for a moment, I feel proud of myself. Proud, for considering his wife andchild.

Proud, for having the thought that I then proceed to do absolutely nothing about. Proud, while I

keepscrollinguntilIgettoapicturewherehe'sholdingagoldenTeacheroftheYearplaquear

OceanofPDF.com

grinninglikeitreallymeanssomethingtohim.Apictureofjusthim.Apicturethatallowsmet indulge my obsession scot-free and guiltless.

"Waldo?"Frannieasks,likeit'sthesecondorthirdtime."Youget-eenout?"

I'mhalfwayupthelawnwhenhetexts.Idebatewaitinguntilmorningtocheckit.Lettingt uncertainty of what it says keep me in this restless, charged limbo. There's something intoxicating about the limbo. I want to indulge it. But that would require self-control. Andinside, as I unravel a Fruit-by-the-Foot from its paper and eat it in three bites at the kitchen counter, I realize self-control is a thing that I don't have. I swallow the last glob and as I feel the gummy belt of candy slide down my throat, I pull open our text thread with shaky hands to see what he said.

*Weneedtotalk.*

*OceanofPDF.com*

“Ifanyonefoundoutwhathappened,I’dlosemyjob.Mymarriage.Mywholelifewouldbeov

The seating at Sleepy Dog, a coffee shop a half hour out of town, is all old living room furniture from some dead grandma’s estate sale. I sit on a floral couch with fringe at the bottom. Korgy sits opposite me, on a puffy chair upholstered with carpet-like fabric, his back to the coffee shop. He wears a baseball cap, the same one he was wearing when he came into Victoria’s Secret that day, and he keeps his head low while he talks. He paid with cash, too. All efforts,Iassume,tokeepthismeetingasdiscreetaspossible.Idon’tknowifI’msupposedtob offended, or ashamed, or embarrassed, to be someone’s secret, their stressor, and maybe their regret, but I’m not. It almost doesn’t matter what I am to him, just that I’m something to him.

Like being something to him

makes me something.

“I’mnotgonnatellanyone,”Isay,reassuringhim.

Itakeasipofmycoffeeandhechewshislip,neitherofussayinganythingforatleasthalfa minute. We just sit here reading each other, or trying to, a silent chess match flitting back and forth, played with our eyes. What’s the next move?

“Look,Waldo,”hestarts,andIcantellthathe’stornbetweensayingwhatheneedstosay- thatitcanneverhappenagain-andwhathewantstosay- thatithasto.Thatheneedsitevery bit as much as I do.

Hehesitates.Takesasharpbreath.Popshisjaw.“It…

canneverhappenagain,okay?” “Is that what you want?” I ask.

The barista downstairs shouts “Marianne”, with a tinge of “I give up on my life” in thetone.

OceanofPDF.com

“Yes,”hesays,unblinking.

Iwanttoreachoverandgrabhiscockandfeelithardeninmyhandandsay“Noit’snot.You want me. And you feel guilty about it, and awful, and disappointed in yourself, but it doesn’t matter what you feel about what you want. All that matters is that you want it. What you want is the truth of who you are. And you want me.” But instead I say, “Are you sure?”

Thebaristashouts“Marianne”again,thistimewithheat.Maybetheyhaven’tgivenupon life yet.

“Yes,I’msure,”Mr.Korgysays.ButIthinkbacktotheothernightatwinterformal,howh body was saying a completely different thing from what his mouth was saying. So I turn my attention to it.

Hislegsarecrossedandhisarmsarefoldedoverhisbellylikehe’stryingveryhardtoclose himself off, to shut me out. But the gesture looks forced, against his will even. Underneath the pose, I feel his pull, magnetic and undeniable. The truth.

“No,”Isayfinally.“Ithinkyou*wish*youwantedustoneverhappenagain.ButIdon’tthink that’s what you actually want. Can you admit that to me at least?”

“Waldo,you’resoyoung,”hesays,pleadingwithmeandwrestlingwithhimselfatthesa time. He runs his hands through his hair and shuts his eyes and repeats it half-under his breath. “So young.”

I can’t tell whether I’m supposed to feel insulted or validated. Is this a rejection or an admission of feelings? Or maybe it’s a challenge. I almost push but something in me stops me. Tells me to wait it out. Knows he has more to say. And then he looks at me with a combination ofguiltandanguish,deepconcernanddeeplonging,andIfeelapieceofhimcrackopenbefor he even says it.

OceanofPDF.com

“Idohavefeelingsforyou,andthey…

keepmeupatnight.Butthere’snothingIcando about them.”

“Yes,thereis.”

“I’vealreadygonesofaroutofline.I’mhorrified.I’mashamedofmyself.Thisisvery,ver

wrong. I have to… pull myself together for my family.”

“I’mnottryingtointerferewithyourfamily.I’mokaynothavingallofyou.I’lltake

whatever I can get.”

“No,Waldo,youdeserve*all*ofsomeone.Someonewhocanbethereforyou*fully*.Who’s

emotionally available.”

“Aseventeenyearold?

Youthinksomebeefysenior’sgonnabeemotionallyavailable between his

rounds of Grand Theft Auto and his daily hour of Pornhub?”

“There are good, age-appropriate guys outthere.”

“What in my life is age-appropriate? I bought my car, my laptop, my

clothes, my gas. I pay the electric bill. I do the laundry and the dishes and the

vacuuming. I’ve been managing my

mom’semotionssinceIwasfive.Idon’tspendmydaysworryingaboutwhosawmyBeRealo

whathousepartyI’mgonnagetwastedat,Iworryaboutifwater’sgonnacomeoutofthefauce

the next time I turn it on. If my Mom’s gonna be bedridden from a breakup

and I’m gonna have to drop everything in my life to be there for her so she

doesn’t spiral so bad she loses another job. None of that’s age-appropriate.”

“You’reright,thosearethingsseventeenyearoldsshouldn’thavetoworryabout.Butyo

stillseventeen.AndIamstillalotolderthanyou.Ihavelifeexperiences,acontextforlife,that

can only come with age. I’ve made mistakes that you haven’t. I have regrets

that you don’t. I

assureyou,yourfeelingsformewillfade.Threemonthsfromnow,you’llbegoingtoproman

OceanofPDF.com

you'llbelaughingaboutthecrushyouhadonyourcrustyoldteacherwithyourgirlfriends.An probably your boyfriend."

"Idon'twantaboyfriend.Iwantyou,"Isay."AndIknowyouwantmetoo.We'retwosad, bored, tired, lonely people who want each other."

"I'm scared that I'll hurtyou."

"I'dratherbehurtbyyouthangoonbeingsupremelyunphasedlikeIambyeverybodyelse

Thebaristashouts"Marianne"athirdtime,thistimewithrage.I'malmostproudofthe character growth. Marianne finally steps forward for her frappuccino.

"JustknowthatIgetwhatthisis,"Isay."Iknowtherules.Igetit.AndIwantitanyway."

"I can't, Waldo. I can't do this."

"Just promise me you'll think aboutit."

*OceanofPDF.com*

I grab my keys, throw on a puffer and a beanie, and head to my car. The weeklong shipping times of online shopping make for delayed gratification. I need more. A surge. A rush. The swipeofplastic.Theshineofaredsalesticker.Thatfeelingofwalkingintoamallwithnothing coming out with the promise of a new me.

I feel feral. I look cracked out. I'm starving and nauseous at the same time, my stomach churningwithagiddy,queasycombinationofthrillanddread.When'shegonnasaysomethi What's he gonna say? Is he gonna say anything at all?

I pull into the mall parking lot and circle it three times trying to find a parking space but it's toocrowdedfromallthekidsoutofschoolandlast-minuteChristmasshoppers,soeventuallyI cut off another car to snag a halfway decent spot. Not my proudest moment. The driver honks and flips me off, and I feel vindicated.

Once inside, I start with a wallet from Michael Kors then do some real damage at Sephora - a Dior foundation in a frosted glass bottle, a mini honey hair oil that I couldn't decide if I lovedthe scent of or hated, a Milk Makeup cheek n' lip that I convinced myself was a steal instead ofa marketing ploy since you can smear the cream on two areas of your face instead of one(wow!), and a hand cream at the checkout counter that made its way into my bag .3 seconds beforepaying,whichshouldbeillegal.IseeapairofcheckeredVansinthewindowatJourney and buy them even though they're a half-size too big and my heels slip out when I walk, then a pair of brown wide shaft boots at Macy's that I have no

idea how to style. I use my 40%discount at VS for a banana-colored corset top that doesn't even suit my complexion and a new 4-piece travel makeup bag that I don't need because when the fuck do I travel?

*OceanofPDF.com*

IgetinlineatAuntieAnne's,shoppingbagsdiggingmarksintomyarms.Mybodycraves
somethingtodistractitandjunkfoodpackedwithpreservativesandchemicallyengineered
be addicting seems like the fix.

AsIstandinlinewatchingtheglovedemployeestwistdough,timeisaslow,stretchedblo
Anobstacle.AthingIonlywanttogetridof,tofill,tokill,soIcangettothenextmomentthat
counts, the one where he writes me back.

Myphonepings.Iswipeitopenbeforetheping'shalfwaythrough.It'sRandyFuckingJu
checking in because it's "been a while", aka putting out the feeler if I'd still
be down to fuck. I
guessTinyTitsfromwinterformaldoesn'tputout.Idon'trespond.Thecustomerinfrontofm

I wolf down the pretzel and suck down the lemonade on my drive home. I chuck Mom's sticky note in the trash and dump my shopping bags onto my bed. I try on the corset top. It doesn't look as cute in the honesty of my bathroom mirror. This is a mirror that's seen me a million times before. That knows exactly who I am. That knows I'm not a corset-top girl. I try ontheshoes.Bothpairslookstupid.Ismearhoneyoilintomyhair.Itlooksgreasy.Iwashmy face for a clean canvas to put more shit onto. I squirt two pumps of foundation onto my wrist and smack it onto my cheeks with a sponge. It's orange and patchy.

Ichuckthefoundationatmybathroommirror.Itcracksandthefoundationbottleshatters
frosted glassy bits and beigy-orange liquid splattering everywhere. The goo drips down the walls. My phone buzzes.

Mr.Korgy:*I'mabouttoheadoutfrompokernightatmyfriend'splace.Willyoubealoneinan*

Ilookatmyselfinthemirror.Andsuddenly,thecorsettoplooksokay.

*OceanofPDF.com*

He

comes

over

drunk.

“I’mdrunk,”hesays.

“I

know,”

I

say.

“Isthatokay?

ThatI’mdrunk?”“Yes.”

Anditis.It’smorethanokay.Ilovehimlikethis.Glossyeyes.Jawshifting.Bumbling aroundwithbeerstainsonhisshirt.Hisconcretewallsknockeddown,revealingsomeone childlike and needy.

I didn’t have long to prepare but I did my best, spritzing and shaving and smoothing every crevice as quickly as I could. I shook some dry shampoo onto my roots and added in a few pumpsofcurlrefreshingfoam.Seasaltsprayedtherestofmyhair.Doublecleansedmyfaceto rid it of the orange goo, then serum’d, moisturized, primed, and applied my best ten-minutemakeup.

“Comeinside,it’scold,”Isay.

He kicks off his shoes and hangs his cardigan on a hook by the door. I take in the satisfying sightofthatpurplecardiganfinallyoffofhim,finallyhanginginmyhouse.It’sonlyacardigan

butitfeelslikeavictory.Iofferhimadrinkandhesaysokay,soIdigthroughtheliquorbottles while he takes in the place - the outdated fixtures, the generic art prints - registering just how poor and tacky we are. I did what I could, tucking Mom's Bath & Body Works candles into a cupboard and hiding her stack of two-dollar Woman's World magazines, but the meat of the

*OceanofPDF.com*

placestillshoutswhitetrash.Theflickeringlampfromthesalessectionat Marshall's.Theug old ceiling fan. The green couch with the tear in the center of the middle cushion.

"That'swhatyougetforcheappleather,"Isay,usingself-awarenessasacrutchformyshame.

"Atleastthecolor'snice,"hechuckles.Iforcemyselftolaughalongbutinside Icollapse.I wanttoshowhimthatIknowbetter,thatIambetter,thanthisplace.That Ican'tbereducedto or defined by it. By where I come from.

I used to not know the ways in which the white trashness of Mom and I was reflected in every detail of our environment. Of our choices. A lamp's a lamp, I figured. Until the first time Frannie came inside to grab a tampon. It should've been obvious to me just by the fact that it took her two years and an emergency to come inside my place when I'd been in hers a hundred times by then. That I knew her door code and she didn't even know where our bathroom was.

Thatshealwaysdroppedmeofforpickedmeupbuneverwentinside,likethelower-classness would stain her just by being privy to it. But it wasn't obvious to me. Not until she stepped foot on our dishwater-gray carpet.

Isawthewayshewastakingintheplace.Orpretendingtotakeitinbutactuallyjustjudging it. Letting it confirm her opinion of me. Lower her opinion of me even further. Like because we hadanoutdatedceilingfanorthewrongbrandofcandlethatmeantwedidn'tknowthewayth world works.

SomethingwentsourinmystomachandIinstantlywishedshewouldleave.Thatshecou un-havetheframeofreferenceshenowhad.ThatIcouldripherhandawayasshecaressedthe

cheapplasticpictureframesandtheveryartificial-lookingartificialplantsandthespinesofthe cheesy 2-for-1 self-help books Mom was into at the time. That I could wipe that stupid pitying

OceanofPDF.com

smirkoffherfacewhen,onherwayout,sheeyedthe“HomeSweetHome”doormatMomgot from the dollar section at Target. I’ve never felt so powerless in my life, watching someone judgemeinrealtime,notbasedonanythingIsaidordid,butbasedonwhathomedecorIwas surrounded by. Who knew so much personal identity went into a fucking knick-knack?

Next time I went over to Frannie’s place I took note of her home in a way that I hadn’t before. The textured paint jobs. The recessed lighting. The Diptyque candles. The concrete coffeetablewiththecream-colored*100YearsofArchitecturalDigest*bookthatcost$125bucks (I looked it up). I realized how much care and thought must’ve gone into it. And how muchmoney.

Mr.Korgy’shomeisasniceasFrannie’s.Tooniceforahighschoolteacher’ssalary.Gwe clearly comes from money. That explains the real leather chairs by the fireplace. The golden knobs and sink handles in the kitchen. The heavy plates on the table. Gwen said they were hand-molded. I was just impressed they all matched.

Idon’twantMr.KorgytothinklessofmeorbeturnedoffbecauseofwhereIcomefrom.I don’t want him to see a Ross tag on the back of a throw pillow and think, “What the fuck am I doing? I need to go back to my wife.*She*buys pillows from Crate + Barrel.”

He’s been impressed by what I’ve written about where I come from, but seeing it live and in person is a different thing. People worry poorness will rub off on them. And the bad taste that comeswithit.They’llreadabookaboutit.OrwatchamoviewhereJenniferLawrencepreten to be poor while her eight hundred dollar highlights gleam in her closeups.

But they don’t want to really know it. Be exposed to it in any kind of real way. Except maybe cutting a check for a grand or two around the holidays to the Salvation Army or the Red Cross. But is that even exposing themselves to it, really? Or just a way of distancing themselves from it even more?

*OceanofPDF.com*

“Where’syourmom?”heasksasIpourhimhiswhiskey.Ididn’tevenaskhimwhathe wanted. Didn’t need to.

"Anytimeamanlookstiredortroubledyoudon'taskhimhowhelikeshisdrink,youpour four fingers' worth of whatever you've got and you give it to him neat and you give it to him quick," Mom used to tell me. Back then, I wasn't sure how this advice applied to a seven-year-old,butnowI'mthankfulforit.

“She’soutwithherwannabeboyfriend,”Isay,handinghimhisdrink.“Imean,shewants him to be. I get the feeling he doesn’t want to be.”

Helooksaround,decidingwheretosit.It’sanawkwardlull,andinthelull,panicfloodsme Idon’twanthimtositanywhere.Sittingmightgivehimsecondthoughts,timetoreconsider,s I suggest we go to my bedroom. He says we don’t need to rush, but I push with a string of reasons - that it’s more comfortable, smells better, that the lights work - and he gives in.

Hetakesinmyroomwithgreatreverence,combingthroughtheberetsandhandcreamsar trays of jewelry on top of my dresser, touching hoop earrings and charm bracelets and shitty mood rings from that carnival with Frannie five years ago.

He looks at a picture of Mom and me. I’m a toddler, two or three, my hair pulled up into a highponytailwithaTweetybirdscrunchie,messycurlsrainingdownthebackofmyneck.Or of Mom’s arms is wrapped around me, the other flicking a cigarette.

“Wow.Lookatthatsmile,”hesays.

Hesitsontheoversizedbeanbagchairinthecorner,theoneIkeepswearingIneedtogetrid of because it takes up half the room. It doesn’t swallow him up the way it swallows me. He’s able to hold his own against the bean bag. I respect this.

OceanofPDF.com

I stay cross-legged on my bed and he stays, sitting there in the beanbag chair, and we just look at each other. Minutes go by in total silence, filled only by the sound of sipped whiskey. Our eyes undress each other. Not just our clothes, but every pretense, every drop of posturing, every surface-level exchange, every line spoken with humor or cleverness or whatever tool we usedtotrytoavoidthis:thetruth.Thatwearesodeeplylostinoneanotherthatit'spointlessto try and fight it.

I scootch forward to the edge of the bed. He stands up from the beanbag chair and sets his whiskeyonmydresser.Mywholebodyshakesashewalkstowardme.Itracehislipswithmy indexfinger,thenmovemylipstohis,rubbingbackandforth,lettingthenerveendingstouch His breath is hot and yeasty. We kiss and pieces of myself shoot off in every direction. Pieces that I might have to pick up later. But for now, we kiss.

He crawls onto my bed. The springs squeak, trying to kill the mood. But they can't. He runs hishandsalongmyleggings.Spanksme.Iwhineforhim.Wesuckeachother'stonguesandli each other's faces. Our bodies are intertwined. Rhythmic. The opposite of every sexual encounter I've had so far. We're so connected. Too connected. Painfully connected. Like my body already can't stand the moment it ends. The moment our bodies separate and I'm stuck with just mine.

Ireachmyhanddowntohiscrotchandrubitoverhissweatpants.Hishardnessmakesme want to cry.

"Waldo,"hemoans.

He peels off my shirt and leggings. I'm boiling for him. But he makes me wait. Runs his handsalongmythighs,thenmyunderwear,thesilkynessmakingmeevenmoresensitivetoh

touch. I pull his penis out of his pants and hold it, letting its warmth run through me.

*OceanofPDF.com*

I beg him to touch me. He pulls my underwear aside, teasing me until my body begs forhim.

He moves his finger to me and I see his eyes shift with recognition. Now he knows just how much I want him. He grows in my hand. I pull him toward me and he slides himself into me, pumpingslowlyatfirst,thenquicker.Mymindbecomesablanksheetofpaper.Anemptywh void. The Matrix. He is, quite literally, fucking my brains out. All my stupid anxieties and cyclical thoughts, my woes and insecurities, my open tabs and fast-fashion carts, gone and replaced with this. I'm alive. Finally.

ThenhestopsandIfeelaswellofsomethingworsethandread.Somethinglikewakingup from a nightmare when you're six years old. Like nothing good will ever happen again.

"Your turn," he says, rolling over so I'm on top. He pulls himself against the headboard, relaxing his body underneath mine. It's so arrogant. So*show me what you've got*. It makes me wanttoscream.Heknowswhathejustdidtome.Hispumping.Histhrusting.Hisfillingmeup His making me whole. He can't take it away like this.

I bounce on him as a whiny plea to get him to take charge again, to move himself into me with the force and pressure from thirty seconds ago when he was dominating. But he only lays there,unflinching,watchingme.Ibounceharderandharder,higherandhigher,upanddown length of it, my whole body on this one part of him, this single appendage of his containing all of me.

Finally,hetwistsmybodyaroundlikearagdoll-himontopofmeagain- andhepounds intome,harder andharder, hisdick likeiron ashegrits histeeth, claimingme, untilIscream.

Afterward,hestrokesthesmallofmybackandtellsmehehastogo,butbeforehedoes,I lay him down flat and I lick his curled belly hairs straight.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Forbreakfast,Imakemyselfanomeletwithcheeseandbananapeppers.It'snicetohave something that's not eaten out of a cardboard tray.

I work a full shift that passes quickly. My boss tells me I'm doing a good job while I'm foldingpanties,whichtakesmeoffguardbecauseIdidn'trealizefoldingpantieswasathing that one could be good at.

Back at home, instead of hurling myself into the usual internet spiral, I click on a 20-minute butt and thigh workout on YouTube led by a girl named Maddy, which feels like the only possible name of someone who would lead a butt and thigh workout on YouTube. I squat and squeeze my way to toned glutes as Maddy, who almost certainly has a teacup Yorkie and cries when she passes a homeless person on the street, tells me that I've got it, that I can do it, and I believe her. I've broken a sweat by minute five and by minute fifteen, I'm drenched. But I persevere.Theworkoutiscomplete.Maddywasright.Icoulddoit.Maybenotformyself,but could do it for him.

Frannie and Tristan pick me up to go looking at Christmas lights, which I usually find depressing.TheplasticsnowmenwinkingandtheLEDSantasthatwavewiththeirricketyar allthedecorationsonthelawndisplaymockingyou.Buttonight,Ifinditallkindofcharming. even buy a cup of cocoa.

Frannie tells me I seem well, and though there has never been a phrase that sounds more like apersonalattack,Idon'tmind.JustlikeIdon'tmindanyoftheusualheavy-

rotationirritations- Mom’s absence or our clogging issues or the rosacea flare currently splotching my cheeks. It actually gives them a little color.

*OceanofPDF.com*

MaybeFrannie’sright.MaybeIamwell.

OceanofPDF.com

Mr.Korgy,9:02pm:Iwasn’ttoodrunk,wasI?

Me,9:04pm:iwastryingtoplayitcoolandwaitafull24hoursbeforetextingbutiwas struggling to hold off, so thank you
Me, 9:05pm: and no, not toodrunk

Me,9:05pm:iwasgladtoseeyouloosenedup

Me, 9:05pm: i feel like

i got to see more ofyou

Mr.Korgy,9:06pm:Wellhopefullynottoomuchofme…

Me, 9:06pm: (...)

Me,9:07pm:

(stopstyping)

Me,

9:08pm:

(...)

Me,9:08pm:nevertoomuch

Mr.

Korgy,

9:12pm:

(...)

Mr.Korgy,9:15pm:Ifyou’resureaboutthat,there’ssomethingI’dliketoshare…

Me, 9:15pm: please

Mr.Korgy,9:20pm:You’resobrightandyourmindissuchasponge.Ikeephavingthisthoug that I want to expose you to all kinds of art and films and music and books. I want to inspireyou.

Me, 9:21pm: you alreadydo

Mr.Korgy,9:23pm:Rather,Iwanttobeusefultoyou.

Mr. Korgy, 9:24pm: (...)

*OceanofPDF.com*

Mr.Korgy,9:29pm:Alaskaissolimited,andyoudeserveaworldthat'sunlimited.Abigger, broader world. Maybe I can show you some of it.

Me,9:30pm:i'mdowntowatchwhatevermoviesorlookatwhateverpaintingsorlistento whateversongs,butjustknowidon'tneedyoutoshowmecasablancatofeellikeourtime together is worthwhile

Mr.Korgy,9:30pm:(...)

Mr.Korgy,9:31pm:CanIseeyoutomorrow?

*OceanofPDF.com*

On the drive with Mr. Korgy, he asks me to duck at the stoplights and by the third time he apologizes.Hesayshefeelsterribleaboutitbutthatwecan'trisksomeoneseeingmeinhiscar and that it's just for around town and that once we're on the highway I can sit up straight. I tell himit'skindofhimtobesoconsiderate,butthatI'mjustgladtobenexttohim.Hecaressesmy hand, and as I sit here doubled over my knees in the front seat of his Subaru, I shut my eyes and I bring his hand to my heart and I feel so, so good.

"Gwen'sspendingChristmasEveoutinPalmerwithherparents,"heexplains."I'msogl you were free." There's no way I wouldn't have been. I switched shifts with a coworker. I would've quit if I needed to.

An hour later, we arrive at the Alyeska Ski Resort, a chateau-style hotel surrounded by mountainpeaks.Itmust'vecosthimafortune,andItellhimasmuch,buthesaysnottoworry about it and that I'm worth it and that he wants this.

Hechecksusinandwegettoourroomandthemomentwedumpourbagsonthebeds, Gwen calls.

"I'llcallherback,"hesays,smilingatmeashesilenceshisphone.Thenhepullsmeinfora kiss. We have sex on the bed and then I go to take a shower and Mr. Korgy joins me and we have sex there too. He gets out quickly so he can call Gwen back while I finish up.

Afterward,weorderroomserviceforlunch.Grilledcheeseandfriesforme.Asaladnicoi for Mr. Korgy.

"I'vegottastayinshapeforyou,"hesays,butwhenourfoodarriveshesneaksacoupleoffr

OceanofPDF.com

Wewatchskiershaulingtheirgeartowardthechairliftandmakeuplifestoriesforthem.Ig
first: A bored 40-something housewife whose one reprieve is her weekly ski lesson. She doesn't care that she's terrible at it. She needs this. She's grown sick of her corny husband, even repulsed by him, and yet can't extract herself from the marriage. She stays in it 'for the kids',she tells herself, unable to admit that actually, her staying in the marriage is evidence of her own personal values: consistency, and familiarity, and a penchant for routine. She refuses to acknowledge that it's not actually her husband who repulses her, but herself, for being unable to leave him.

Mr. Korgy compliments my ability to build a character. The specificity.

The backstory.

"Veryreal,verygood,"henods."I'mimpressed.AndIwon'tbeabletobeatitbutI'lltry."

Hepointstoamanwithastringygoateeandmakesuphisstory.He'sapotheadretireewho refers to the slope as "his mountain" and can't wait to feel that "soft pow" under his skis. He teachesskiinglessonsontheweekends,andwhenthekidsaskhimhowtosteer,hetellsthem, "You don't. You just let the mountain take you where it wants you to go."

Mr. Korgy shows me old Richard Pryor bits on YouTube, and George Carlin, and Lenny Bruce,andsaysthebestwaytounderstandcultureatanygiventimeistoseewhatpeopleare laughing at.

WelayinbedandpullthecoversupoverourheadsandMr.Korgytellsmeabouthismothe who he says has been putting on a brave face since his father died, but he knows she's reallystruggling.

"She'sbeenknittingscarvesconstantly,"hesays."Shewon'tstopknittingscarves.And nobody knits a scarf unless they're so sad that feeling the sadness would be

intolerable, so instead they just go numb and spend hours picking out yarn at Joanne's."

*OceanofPDF.com*

Iaskhimabouthisfatherandhetellsmetheywereneverascloseashewantedtobe,thathe felt like he couldn't get through to him. That only on a very rare occasion did he crack a smile.

"Ineverknewwhatwasgoingonwiththeguy,"hesays.

"Soundslikeadad,"Isay,andthenheasksmeaboutmine,soItellhimwhatIrememberof him from the years when he came around more. How his breath smelled like orange Tic Tacs and how he had a habit of coughing when he was nervous, like when Mom would ask him who he'd been spending his time with or why he smelled like perfume.

"Youreekofbergamot!"she'dshriek.

ItellMr.KorgyhowthelastIsawhim,hewouldhavebeeninhisearlytwenties,buthowhe seemed so old to me. Korgy asks if I miss him, and it surprises me when I say yes.

Mr. Korgy tells me about Decembers growing up in Orlando, how they'd all put on puffer coats and run outside the second the temperature hit seventy, too eager for whatever glimpse of "winter weather" Florida was gonna get. He tells me how much he loved Christmas, writing three page letters to Santa, building snowmen with wet sand - sandmen, making homemade presents for his family - a handwritten poem for his mother, a painted mug for his dad, a friendshipbraceletforhissister.Hesaysthathedidn'toutgrowthemagicofChristmasbyeig or nine the way most boys do, that despite store-bought gifts replacing homemade ones and Santa fading away, the magic lasted for him. That the only thing that took the magic away was when his sister died.

"Westilltriedtoputonhappyfacesand Christmassweaters,makethesameturkeydinner decorate the tree with the same ornaments, but there was an undeniable shift.

An unshakeable weight. That feeling of pretending things are the same as they used to be while knowing they never will be."

*OceanofPDF.com*

“Thatsoundssoheavy,”Isay,“How’dyoudealwithit?

How’dyoucope?” He looks at me, chewing his lip, and

lets out a self-conscious sigh.

“It’s embarrassing so brace yourself,” he says, “But I fell into a pretty significant World of Warcraft addiction. Not blow, not alcohol. World of Warcraft. I’d stuff myself in my room for hours.Sunuptosundown,wouldn’tevencomeoutformeals.Mymomwouldbringfoodtom for lunch and dinner.”

Asmallgrinofpridecreepsontomyface.Pride,thathe’ssharingsomethingthat embarrasses him. The kind of thing you try to hide the most.

“You’remakingfunofmeinyourmind,Icanseeit,”hesays.

“I’mreallynot.I’mgladyoushared.It’s… humanizing.Thatyoulovedacomputergame. Makes me feel better about the months of my life I’ve wasted on realityTV.”

I tell him about my favorite Christmases growing up, the ones at the trailer park. How it sounds sad just because of the words “trailer park” but how it was actually pretty great. How every family would make a different dish and we’d all bring them out to a long fold-out plastic table and make a big buffet of it. Roast and ham and chicken, candied yams and green bean casseroleandstuffingandpumpkinpieandstore-brandcannedcrescentrollsthatwe’dsprinkle with cinnamon sugar. We’d sit in lawn chairs around the fire, wearing our warmest coats, our breathwhiteinthecoldair,andwe’dsingChristmascarolsorlistentooneoftheadultsreadus The Grinch or The Gift of the Magi or The Night Before Christmas.

“Don’tseeanybodyinthefancyzipcodeswithcommunitylikethis,”Momwouldsay.Ar I’d nod in agreement.

Onthedriveback,Mr.Korgyplaysmetracksheusedtoloveasateenager.I’veheardafew ofthem-“SimpleKindofLife”byNoDoubt,“Bent”byMatchboxTwenty,andthatsongthat

*OceanofPDF.com*

goes“howlonghowlo-o-ong,willIslide”bytheRedHotChiliPeppers,buttherestIdon’t know. Radiohead and The Cure and The Pixies, he tells me, and I try to commit at least the chorus melodies to memory so that if they randomly come on again sometime when we’re together, I can reference them and impress him.

“Men get so impressed by references,” Mom once told me. “All you gotta do is know a couplelinesfrom*TheBigLebowski*andyou’regolden.Ioncesaid‘TheDudeAbides’toaguy and you’d have thought I blew him.”

Mr.Korgykeepsplayingsongsandhethrowshisheadbackandsingsalong,beltingoff-key and laughing when his voice cracks, and I watch him.

HedropsmeoffandasIsitupstraighttogetoutofthecar,helooksatmeandhesays, “Waldo, you make me feel young again.”

AndIlookathimandIsay,“Youmakemefeelyoung.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

We sip stale coffee while the quivery vibratos of famous, dead crooners carry classic Christmasmelodies,theirgreatgrandkidsnowcashingintheroyalties.Mustbenice.Igetthe grand slam. Mom orders an egg white omelet but switches to a regular when she finds out the egg whites are a two-buck up-charge.

"Can'tbelievethisworld,theychargeyoutotakesomethingaway,"Momsaystooloudly the waitress will hear, like the twenty-year-old with pink streaks and a tongue piercing has anything to do with the Denny's menu pricing.

"I think you should've splurged," I say. "A Christmas gift to yourself."

Momripsthetopoffanotherpacketofsugaranddumpsitintohercoffee.

"You're in a good mood," she says as she stirs.

"Yeah,"Isay."IguessIam."

"Don'tknowwhy.Suchagloomyday.Sodrab,"Momsays,lookingoutthewindowatthe cars in the parking lot, all coated in a sheet of snow.

She'sinashittymoodbecauseshehasn'theardfromhermanyet.AndI'minagoodone because I have heard from mine.

*Merry Christmas, beautiful,*he texted.*I wish I could be spending the day withyou.*

I got the message on the drive over and I read it three times, letting my finger comb over everyword,likeapaleontologistdiscoveringafossilthey'vespenttheircareertryingtoloca

Our food comes and we eat it quickly. Mom orders a glass of wine. Then another. Then

another.Guessshecouldhaveaffordedtheeggwhites.Midwaythroughourmeal,herphone

OceanofPDF.com

pingsandherelevenlinessoften,quicklyreplacedbyatwitchy,soul-itchingenthusiasm.She checks the message and frowns again, chucking the phone in her purse.

“Just spam,” shesays.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Gwen'sspendingherNewYear'sEveafternoonwithhersister,gettingbrunchandmani and going shopping, and Gregory's with his grandparents, so Mr. Korgy has an afternoon free, and we take advantage of it.

Wegoforawalkonthecoastaltrail.Mr.Korgywearsabaseballcapandathickwoolscarf around his neck and he keeps his head low whenever we pass people walking or cross country skiing.Whenwecometothefrozen-overpond,hesaysthathewisheswecouldjustgoskating like a regular couple. And he seems sad.

"Youknowwhat,it'sstrangelynice,beingourownlittlesecret,"Isaytocomforthim,eve though I don't mean it. "It feels like us against the world and I kinda like it that way."

And he says that I'm right. And I regret sayingit.

WewalkbacktomyplaceandwatchbitsofoldFrenchfilms-*The400Blows*and*CleoCinqa Sept*. Mr. Korgy pauses them to ask how I like them and his eyes get so wide with expectation that I feel awful about letting him down.

"Not really my thing," Ishrug.

Sohetellsmewhatthey'reabout,thinkingthattheonlyreasonIdon'tlikethemisbecause didn't comprehend them, but I say "No, I got all that. Just not my thing," and he looks like he might cry. So I tell him that regardless I appreciate that they were influential, and I watch his eyes flood with relief.

Mr.Korgygetsuptomakehimselfasnackandwhenhecomesbackintothedoorway empty-handed, he announces that he's gonna Amazon me some groceries.

OceanofPDF.com

“Youneedsomethingsthataren’tmicrowavable,”heexplains,“Orthatdon’tlistsugaras
first ingredient.”

Wehavesexandarelyinginbedafterward,ourhairmessy,ourlimbstangledaroundeach
other’s, our bodies still sweaty from the act.

“Hey,there’ssomethingIwanttotalktoyouabout,”hesays.Andmystomachdrops.

“What?” I ask.

“Ohno,youlooklikeyousawaghost,”hesays,thentakesmyhandinhisandtellsmenotto

“Ijustwantedtotalkaboutgoingbacktoschool.Orwork,asitisforme.Thingsaregonna
change once my regular schedule kicks back in. And I’m worried it will be
jarring for you.
Certainly an adjustment, at least. I want you to know that just because my
schedule is gonna change, and that it might be harder for me to get entire
afternoons free, and that our time
togethermightbeabitmorerushed,thatdoesnotmeanmyfeelingsforyouhavechangedoran
any less.”

It’s considerate of him to bring this up. I was too scared to. I’ve thought
about it a lot, what will happen to us once I don’t have the access to him that
winter break allows for.
I’veruminatedonitinthehoursaftermidnight,whenallruminationstakehold.I’vetriedtocu
spiraling thoughts, tried to talk myself out of them, avoid them with junk
food binges and shopping sprees or, in my healthier moments, reassure
myself with PsychologyToday articles
thatswear“90%offearsdon’tevercometrue”.Butthisonehas.Is.Maybereassuranceisnaiv

“Thanksfortellingme,”Isay,staringatthewall.

“Where’d you go?” he asks.

OceanofPDF.com

“Nowhere.I’mhere,”Isay.Andhesaysthatheistoo,eventhoughfiveminuteslater,heha
to leave.

An hour later, the groceries arrive on the doorstep. I pour myself some chocolate paleo crunchgranolawithalmondmilk,andonlygetthroughthreebitesbeforethrowingitawayan pouring myself a glass of flat root beer.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Korgy was right. Once school starts back, it is harder to find pockets of time together since he has a full plate between grading papers, prepping lessons, and meeting the demands of the family, which are a lot higher than before since Gwen doesn't have the distraction of the holidays. Korgy sneaks away to my place when he can, and we try our best to cram as much as possibleintothetightwindowsoftime,onlytocometoascreechinghaltwhenhisphonealarm starts blaring for him to go.

Thesexisfrenziedandpassionate,ablurthatobliteratesmymindandafterwardleaveson slippery traces, quick flashes of visuals that surface over time, one at a time, serving as the crucial evidence that it ever even happened at all. Exhibit a - a tongue, exhibit b - a thrust, c - a guttural moan, d - the quake of an orgasm.

"Iwishwehadlonger,"Mr.Korgysayseverytimeheleaves.

And I agree with him. But there's nothing we can do about it so we kiss a long, sad, parting kiss and he goes. And then I lay on the patch of bed where he just was, the sheets still warm, his imprint still in them. I lay there and replay every minute we spent together, every line he said and the way he said it, every surface he touched, every joke that made him laugh. And then, once I've laid all the separate moments out, I reorganize them into my mind's best recollection of chronological order. And then once I have them in order, I replay them again, and again, and again, until I have them down pat, stretching the clipped thirty-minutes we had together into hoursofmaterial.IliketothinkMr.Korgydoesthesame,buthe'sprobablytoobusywipinghi toddler's ass.

OceanofPDF.com

We try to keep up through texting on the days between seeing each other outside of school.

Mr.KorgysaysGwenmadeacommentabouthowgluedtohisphonehe'sbeenlately.It'snot thatshewassuspiciousexactly,butthathedoesn'twanthertobecomethatway,sohechanges my name in his phone to Kurt so that we can text more without risk. Still, it's not much.

Check-inshereandthere,"thinkingofyou's",acoupleroundsofemojisifhe'sreallytightontime.

IclingtothecertaintythatIatleastgettoseehimduringclass,andthateventhoughwe're discreet, it's erotically charged, loaded and dangerous, riddled with esoteric glances while the other students scratch off their Starface zit stickers or scour TikTok on mute.

One time after school we have sex in his classroom's cleaning closet. I wrap my legs around him and ride him while he stands there bumping into the mop and the grimey yellow bucket it sitsin,dirtywatersloshingaround.We'reinterruptedbytheclassroomdoorcreakingopenw Mr. Wembley comes in looking for him. We stop cold but the water keeps sloshing and we look at each other terrified. Then we hear the door close.

IbrushmyselfoffasMr.Korgytwistsawiryeyebrowhairbetweenhisfingertipsandapol

"Thatwasreckless,"hesays."Wecan'tdoitagain,neveragainhereatschool.Weneedtol more responsible with this. I need to be more responsible with it."

Isayokaybutmyeyessting.I tellmyselfit'sfromthefumesoftheClorox.

*OceanofPDF.com*

His dick is in my mouth when shecalls.

“Shit.Ishouldprobablytakethis,”hesays.Ipullmylipsoffofhimandasheapologizes,his penis goes flaccid. By the time he clears his throat and answers the call, it’s shriveled up to its resting state.

“Hey,honey,”hesays,hiswife-voiceahalf-octavehigherthanusual.Andplacating.Andcowardly.

“Didyoualreadyleavethestore?”Ihearherask,hertonevoidofthebutteryokaynessfrom our dinner, sitting somewhere between over-it and shrill.

“HadtogotoVons,”Korgysaysashepressesthevolumebuttononhisphonetolowerit.H must not want me hearing the way she speaks to him. “They didn’t have your sweetened condensed milk at Fred Meyer.”

“Okay,canyougetcranberries?”“Yep.”

“Bigbag.32oz.Notthe24.”

“Got

it.”

“Didyouhearme?

Notthe24.”

“I

heard

you.”

“Okay,cuzlasttimeyougotthe24.”

“I will not

get the 24.”

OceanofPDF.com

For a second I'm impressed that she dominates him so effortlessly, scolding him over cranberries.WhileIsithereshovelinghiscockintomymouth,prayinginbetweengagsthatI get it far enough back in my throat that he'll have to love me.

Then a sourness stirs in my gut. Jealousy. I know it has no place here. I signed a verbal contractwith a certain set of rules, and I'm happy with the setup. Happy to be hismistress.

So as his wife rattles off a list of last-minute grocery requests that for whatever reason she couldn't conjure up when she made the list - buttermilk and walnuts and peaches and fresh mint "forthehotcocoagarnish"- Idowhatanyhappymistressdoes.Ileanforwardandstartstroking his cock. Licking it. Sucking his wrinkly balls. Giving him the masculinity she's taken away. Relievinghimoftheexhaustionofmarriage,offamily,ofadisappointingcareerandathinnin hairline. I know my job. My role. To make him feel good. To be his escape. To take him out of the pressures of his life, which includes not putting any pressure on him to be a bigger part ofmine.

Pressurewouldkillusandsoinstead,Isuck.Iblow.Ikiss.Istroke.Ilick.AndIletthosebe the places where I'm allowed to want.

His knees buckle. He explodes into my mouth and I swallow his warm, runny liquid like it's my jealousy. It's a two-for-one, his pleasure and my pain sliding down my throat at the same time.Onedropescapesanddribblesdownmychinandfallstothecarpetjustashetellshiswife that he'll be right home.

OceanofPDF.com

Today was supposed to be wonderful. I was supposed to see him. He was supposed to pick me up and drive me to Beluga Point, where we were supposed to have a picnic overlooking the inlet. But then he texted this morning saying that he just couldn't make it happen. That today wasturningouttobeabusyone.Gwen'sbestfriend's40ththatheforgotaboutandakaratebel ceremony for Gregory. He apologized profusely, and I texted him back that it was totally okay, the way I was supposed to.

Butit'snotokay.I'mnotokay.Ifeelweigheddown.Stupidforcaringsomuch,forbeingso distraught about something so small. It was a picnic. We'll have a picnic another time. I know that.Butmybodydoesn'tknowthat.Orwon'tbelieveit.Soitsitshere,slouchedover,bogged down, and wishing this moment was different.

"Wellhappybirthday,sweetheart,"Momsaysasshestandsoverthetrashbin,scrapingo theburntedgesofacinnamonrollwithabutterknife."I'msorryIcouldn'tgetoffwork,butI figured we could have a nice morning together. Make it special regardless."

Itrytodrumupahalf-enthusiasticresponsebutitfallsflatandMomasksifI'malright,then I try to drum up a half-enthusiastic response to that and it falls flat too. She keeps scraping the burnt parts of the cinnamon rolls while she looks at me, the sound of the scrapes melodic andlooming.

"Are you sure you're alright?" she asks. "Because your eyebrows are bent in that furrowy waytheygetwhenyou'redeepinthoughtaboutsomething.Brooding.Notthatyou'reasulke

didn’t raise a sulker. Just… heavy. You seem heavy.”

OceanofPDF.com

Ihatethatthingmomshave,whereetheycansenseexactlyhowyou'refeelinginexactlyth moments you'd least like them to.

"Yep.Fine.Good,"Isay.

"Istheresomeoneyou'dratherbespendingyourbirthdaywith?"Momasks.

"No, of course not."

Sure,she'salenientmother.Sheallowsunlimitedscreentimeandneverchecksmyrepor cards and lets high fructose corn syrup pass as a food group in my diet. Still, lenience has a ceiling. And "your daughter fucking her high school teacher" is past it.

"Happyto be spendingit with you,"I add, hopingto throw heroff thescent.

"Wellgood,cuzI'mhappytobespendingitwithyou,too.Atleastyourbirthdaymorning Shebendsovertokissmeonthetopofmyheadandsetswhat'sleftofacinnamonrollinfront of me, then she pours us each a steaming mug of coffee and motions her head toward the four gifts in the middle of the table, wrapped in old newspaper.

"You gonna open 'em? I've gotta run here in a sec, but I wanted to see your reaction." Thefirstpresentisazip-upsherpahoodiefromTarget.Thesecond,ajumbopackofSour PatchKids.Thethird,atubeofmascara."That'syourfavoritekind,right?"sheasks.It'shers

Iunwrapthecornerofthefourthpresent.It'sarectangularboxbearingthephotoofan aggressively lime green electric scooter.

"Isn'tthattheoneyouwanted?"

It is the one I wanted. Three years back. Before I coulddrive.

"Iknewyou'dloveit,beenwaitingsolong,"MomsaysbeforeIcanreact,tearsbrimming the thoughtfulness of her own gift. "I feel so bad I couldn't get it for ya earlier, but what's that

OceanofPDF.com

saying?Goodthingscometothosewhowait,right?
AndIknowyou'llhavetowaitawhile longer, til the weather clears, but what's another couple months, right?"

"Right," Inod.

"Alright,sweetheart,"shesays,pattingmyshouldertwice."Iloveyousomuch.Mwa.I'l back later, let's try to grab dinner or something - you, me, and Tony, if he's up for it."

And she's out the door. I chuck my cinnamon roll into the trash, rip the top off the bag of SourPatchKids,andshovelahandfulintomymouth.Iruntomybedroomandbellyfloponmy bed, whipping open my laptop. Tab. Tab. Tab. Tab. Cart. Cart. Cart. Cart. Desperate to chase away this heavy emptiness. To fill it with items that can carry me to a version of myself who is whole and happy and satisfied with what she's got. Who wants for nothing because she has everything she could possibly need.

Iaddandaddandadd.Ifcaprisdon'tdoit,maybeamaxiskirtwill.Orashimmeringcream eyeshadow. Or a pair of patterned tights. Or a stupid fucking sweater with a stupid fucking boatneck that doesn't even suit me.

Andthenmyphonelightsupwithatext.*Surprise! WasabletoskipGwen'sfriend'sparty(thankGod),soI'vegotacouplehourstosparetocelel*

WhatifMomhadgottenoffworkandplannedadayforherandItospendtogether? Whatif IwasboredandwenttoFrannie's?WhatifI'dbeencalledintowork? HetextedlikeheknewI didn't. I wouldn't. Like he knew there was nowhere I could possibly be or anyone I could possibly be with that I wouldn't drop in a second to be with him.

Andhe'sright.

*let'sdoit,*Itext.*whenwillyoubehere?*

*OceanofPDF.com*

On the drive up to Beluga Point, he tells me about his high school band, Right to Refuse, and how they broke up because the lead singer fell for a girl. He goes on a rant about how refining yourartistictasteisthesecondmostimportantthingtofindingyourartisticvoice,thentellsm about authors I should read - Chekhov and Tolstoy and George Saunders and David Foster Wallace-andfilmmakersIshouldknow-BergmanandKubrickandKurosawa,Lonerganand Linklater and Solondz.

I'musedtothepersonI'mdating,orsleepingwith,orwhateveritis,tellingmeallthething I ought to know instead of getting to know me. It's how men, or boys, or both, communicate.

Theyquote and theyriff and theyrant and theyexplain and theyexplain and theyexplain.

Butwiththeothers,it'sbeencringey,likeRandyJulepquotingJoeRoganorPaulBornste offering soliloquies on Michael Bay's cinematic prowess. Korgy's a different breed: A learned man with good taste and well-honed perspective and hard-earned life philosophies. There's a wisdom to him. And a sadness I find hard not to trust.

"Where should I start?" I askhim.

"Saunders," he says, beaming. "Start withSaunders."

We arrive at the lookout. He parks facing away from the sunset. He lifts the trunk and splays out a blanket and a picnic basket packed with finger sandwiches and fruit and cheese and salami andabottleofwineforhimandabottleofsparklingciderforme.Iwantthewine.He'shesitant but relents when I tell him Mom lets me have it.

Weeachhaveaglassandwelaughandwetalkandhekissesmeasthesunsets,cuppingmy breasts and sucking my neck and for this moment, we feel like a real, regular couple.

*OceanofPDF.com*

“ThisisthebestbirthdayI’vehad,”Itellhim,andhelaughsandsaysthatmyotherbirthday must have been terrible. I assure him that, for the most part, they were, particularly my thirteenth, a surprise party that Frannie’s parents threw me at the bowling alley.

“It was a very nice gesture, but I hate bowling alleys and I hatesurprises.”

Hetellsmethatheusedtobeinabowlingleague,andItellhimthat’sembarrassing,andhe doesn’t disagree.

“Anyway,thanks.Thismeansalot,”Isay.Andhesmilesandsayshe’sgladbutthere’sthe faintest fleck of something else in his eyes. A certain ache.

“What?” Iask.

“I just wish I could do so much more,” hesays.

Wedon’tsaymuchonthedriveback.Wedon’tneedto.Weholdhandstheentiretime,eve when they get sweaty and gross. He drops me off at my apartment. I ask if he needs to come in for a shower, to wash any scent of me away. He says that’s thoughtful of me but that he’ll have time to do it at home before Gwen gets back.

*OceanofPDF.com*

"Whoyoutext-

een?"Frannieasksasshewaddlestowardmeonthetoestopsofherrollerskates.

"Mymom."

IstuffmyphoneinmypocketandhopethatFranniewillmoveonbutalreadyknowthatshe won't. She takes a seat next to me on the bench and comments that I've been out here awhile,

thenasksifeverything'sokay,hertonesyrupybuthereyeslikedarts.Itellhereverything'sfin and that I just wanted to stretch my feet for a sec before getting back out on the rink.

"Hmm…"Franniesays,thumpingherchinlikeacartooncharacter."What?"

"Oh, I dunno," she shrugs, embellishing the casualness, begging for me to askagain.

Myphonebuzzesinmypocket.Frannie'slipspressintoatightline.Aviolenturgetugsat me, to push her off the bench. It's not about hurting Frannie. It's about getting rid of her. Not having to deal with her speculation. Or even just with her interruption.

Mr. Korgy and I only get short, stolen patches once or twice a day to text. He's got so much

goingon.Somanyobligationsbetweenhisfamilyandhisworkandtendingtoallthethingsth need tending to in a middle-aged life - colonoscopies and root canals and trips to Home Depot and whatever else. So when he does reach out, I drop whatever I'm doing to make myself available. It's pathetic and I don't even care. I don't need dignity. I just need him.

Thetimbreofourexchangesisintense–franticandclawing,all-

consumingrapid-firemissiles shot back and forth. The content is dynamic, running the gamut from flirty emojis to horny and hurried sexting to bursting confessions. I get so swept up in the messages that I can’t see or hear

*OceanofPDF.com*

anythingelse,therestofmylifeblottedawaywhileIgetlostinthesix-inchphonescreenthat represents him.

Untilhesignsoffwithaquickgoodbye.Andeverythingiscalmagain.Andsadagain.And empty again.

So I reread them. Three times, four times, five times. On work breaks, over dinner, before bed. I pore over every gray bubble. Find meaning that may or may not be there. Place extra emphasisonthesoftwords.Thetenderones.Theapologeticones.Theoneswherehegivesju a little more. Sometimes I touch the texts, like a widow who grazes her fingers through her deceased husband's sweaters. Reverently. Longingly. Clinging to any trace of him.

"YoushouldcomeskateacouplemoreroundswithmeandTristanbeforetheyclose…"

My phone buzzes again and my hand instinctively moves to it. It knows how limited our interactionsare,howclipped,knowsthatifIdon'tgetbacktohimrightnowImightmissmy window.Hemightgetbusywithsomething–orsomeone–else.Shootoffaquick"Sorry,gotta run!" or "Catch you later!" that pulls my heart out of my bowels with how casual it is. How effortless. How easy it is for him to let go. To leave. While I'm stuck here lightheaded and beating myself up for not getting back to him that much faster, not squeezing one more back-and-forthoutoftheexchange,onemorebeat,onemorenotchonthefueltankthatwill keep me going. Until next time.

"Yousureevery-theen'sokaywithyourMom?"

Westareateachother.It'sashowdown.SheknowsI'mkeepingsomethingfromher,and

know that she knows I'm keeping something from her, and she knows that I know that she knows I'm keeping something from her. But I'm not about to tell her what it is. And we both know that too.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Frannie'sthelastpersonIwouldtellaboutKorgy.She'dmarchstraighttoPrincipalSand
office with her sanctimonious little smirk, arms on her hips while she spills
every last detail,
gettinghimfiredandthenconsolingmewitha"there,there"patontheshoulder,explainingth
she did what she needed to do to be a good friend. That she did it for me.

"Yep,she'sfine,"Isay."I'mgonnarestmylegsasecondlongerthenI'llmeetyoubackou
"Okee dokee," she says, waddling back toward therink.

I rush to open our text thread, zoning in on his most
recent gray
bubble.*Shoot,gottagogiveGregabathandputhimtobed.Catchyoulater,pretty.*A
piece of me dies as I heart the message.

*OceanofPDF.com*

“Going to lunch!” I shout over my shoulder to the nearest manager, then I race out the front of the store and past the kiosks with teenage employees too busy playing Candy Crush to try and hawk shoe polish or fridge magnets or whatever kiosk good no one wants to buy. I pick up my pace,nowsprintingdownthemallcorridor.Irunfasterandfaster,throughtheJCPenneywhe a woman wags a perfume stick sample in my face.

“Dior!”sheshouts,desperateforhercommission.Asecurityguardtellsmetoslowdown

Ipushopenthedoubledoorsandseehis Subaruthereinthemiddleofthesecondrow,light on. I run toward him, almost slipping on the snow.

“Hi,”Isay,pantingasIpullopenthepassengerdoor.

“You didn’t need to run,” he

laughs.

“Ididn’twannawasteourtimetogether.”

Iclimbinandpullthedoorshutbehindme.Hewagsabrownpaperbaginmyface.

“I brought you lunch,” he says. “Pil’s Deli. Best BLT in

Anchorage.”

Hesetsthesandwichbaginmylapandtellsmetotakesomebreathsandgetcomfortableas he takes my hand in his, stroking the top of my wrist and tracing my knuckles. He moves his hand up the length of my arm to my shoulder and starts massaging it.

“Aren’tyougonnaeatit?”heasks,noddingtothebag.

“I’m not hungry yet.”

“You’vebeenworkingallday,you’vegottaeatsomething.”

“Idon’t wantto wasteour timetogether scarfingdown asandwich.”

OceanofPDF.com

“Somebody’sworriedtoday…”hesays,glidinghisfingersthroughalockofmyhairwith leisurely arrogance. It startles me when my shoulders tense.

“Hey,”hesays,realizationdawning.“Issomethingthematter?”

I pluck a gum wrapper from the center console and roll it into a tiny tinfoil ball, pressing it until my fingertips dent. I want to be fun. I want to be light. I want to be breezy and care-free andcool.Iwantwhateverhegivesmetobeenough.Iwanttobesatisfied.Tobesatiated.Tobe grateful. To be content.

But I’m not any of those things. I’m hungry and hurting and I want more. I want so much more.ButIcan’tsayanyofit.BecausemorethanIwantanyofthat,Idon’twanttoscarehim off. And nothing scares off a man like the needs of a woman.

“Hey… it’s okay. I wish we had more time together too,” he says, reading me. Then he readjusts in his seat, twisting toward me. “Can I tell you this weird fantasy I keephaving?”

And then before I can answer, he tells me. His fantasy is that the world stops, everyone freezes in time, and we get the whole place to ourselves. Somehow we wind up in Hawaii. We brewmacadamianutcoffeeandbigeggybreakfasts.Wegoforlongdrives.Welayonthebeac We watch the waves. We swing in hammocks. We make a lot of love.

“Iknowitsoundsjuvenile,”hesays,disclaimingit,“Andit’snotevenreallyaboutHawai Oritis,butonlypartially.It’smostlyabouttime.Havingenoughofit.Havingplentyofit.Not having to hurry our time together since it’s stopped for everyone else.”

Itakethisconfession,thisfantasy,astheproofIneed.Acalming,soothingsalve.A testament to his reciprocal, equal feelings. His own plea for more time together.

“Icouldcallinsicktowork?”Ioffer.“It’saslowday,theydon’tneedme.”

“No, no. I wouldn’t want you to do that.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

“It’sreallynoproblem.I’llcallrightnow.”

“No,Ishould–
Ishouldgetbackanyway,”hesays.“ItoldGwenIwasgrabbinglunchwitha friend. Probably can’t be gone too much longer as is.”

“Oh, right.Sure.”

Myrosaceasproutsbrightred,callingmeoutforbeingsostupid.Forbelievingforevena second that the constraints on our time together were because of my work schedule and not his…
life.ThereisnoHawaii,nobeach.Justthescrapeofthewindshieldwipersagainstice.

Something else bubbles in me. A hot lump, fiery and charged. Something that wonders if he knowswhathe’sdoing,ifhe’susinghisfantasyofusrunningawaytogetherasathin,lazyway to appease me. As a placeholder for being emotionally available. For showing up. For loving me. I try to swallow this thing, to tell it to go away, to remind it how hard Mr. Korgy tries, that he’s giving everything he can, spending my birthday with me, bringing me BLT’s on my lunch break, but this thing won’t leave. And if this thing won’t leave, the best I can do is shove a pacifier in it to shut it up. And there’s only one clear pacifier I can think of.

“Fuckme,” Isay.

And he does. Hard. Here on the folded down shotgun seat of his Subaru in the JC Penney parkinglotwiththehailpeltingthewindowasoursoundtrack.Hethrustsintomysolidrage, over and over, every pump puncturing it, making it weep like a bad blister.

WetwistaroundsoI’montopandhetellsmethatIfeelamazing,andheasksifI’mhisgood

girl,andIsayyes.AndthenIridehimlikethegoodgirlthatIam.Thegirlwholoveshim.Who only wants to please him. To make things easier for him. To be exactly what he wants. What he needs. The girl who hopes that if I wedge myself into a doll, a dream, a marionette with lifeless

OceanofPDF.com

eyes,porcelainskin,andnoneedsofmyown,adollwhoindulgeshisfantasiesandguzzleshis

cum, maybe then he will love me too.

*OceanofPDF.com*

The Race begins. The Race for beauty, for wholeness, for emerging into someone worthy, fuckable,lovable.Iprayfortyminutesisenoughforthetransformation.It'sgonnahavetobe speedthroughtheyellowlightsandrollthroughthestopsignstogethomefromschoolahalfa minute quicker. Every second counts in The Race.

I throw whitening strips on my teeth and smear handfuls of goopy conditioner on my hair, thentwistitupinaclawclipandhopintheshower.Idoubleshave,upeachportionofmybody and then back down that same portion, then scrub every square inch of myself with a salt scrub that feels like the taste of wasabi as it seeps into my pores. I rinse the conditioner out and wash the body scrub off and pat my skin dry with a towel instead of rubbing to prevent redness, then massage myself with body butter and body oil and spritz myself with body spray.

I glance at the clock. I've gotta movefaster.

"I'llbethereatfouronthedot,"hesaid."It'salongdrive.Don'twanttogosomewhere close by and risk us getting caught…"

"Got it," I nodded like a soldier. His soldier. Ready to do as he instructs.

"Dressnice,"hesaid."Andcomehungry.Theydoanamazingcioppino."

"Great," I said, even though I had no idea what a cioppino was.

This is the second date Mr. Korgy has planned for us, the other being my birthday. Our secondrealdate,whereconsiderationhastogointoitandarrangementshavetobemadeand

scheduleshavetobediscussed.Igetwhythistypeofoutingisararity-aluxury-forus,and I've been careful to not ask Korgy for more of them. Nobody needs a nagging wife and a

*OceanofPDF.com*

nagginggirlfriend,onewhiningforhimtodothedishes,theotherwhiningforhimtobuyhera
bowl of spaghetti.

*I'm his reprieve*, I remind myself,*I'm his reprieve. And who needs dates anyway?*

*They'recontrivedperformances,peopleswirlingtheirwhiskeysoursandflirtingwithlines a James Bond movie. What we have is beyond that.*

Andsometimes,thatworks.Butsometimes,Istarttowonder,isit?
Isaquickfuckinthe cleaning closet beyond that?

Ithrowonarobeandripopenahydratingcucumber-scentedfacemasksoaggressivelythe masksplitsintotwohalves.Nomatter.Isplayeachhalfonmyfaceandhammerthemintomy skin with taps of my fist, hoping that will get the vitamins and nutrients to ooze into my pores faster.Iblow-drymyhair,yankoffmywhitestripsandflickthemoffmyfingersintothetrashcan.

I search my closet like a madwoman, the hangers scraping on the rack as I slide items back and forth. Jackets and jeans and blouses and bodysuits, dresses and shoes and necklaces and pants.Somanydifferentidentitiesinoneclosetand I'mjustthepaperdollreadytodisplayany one of them, whichever will be the one he wants the most.

FirstItrycoolgirl-bodysuit,boyfriendjeans,leatherjacket.Icouldstarttalkinginaraspier voice. Pick up smoking and guitar. I stand on the toilet so I can check my reflection in the poor man's full-body mirror. All I see is a girl trying too hard. A girl who's never smoked a Camel and isn't able to pull off looking like she has.

Itry"effortlesschicgirl"next-trousers,snugwhitetee,blazer,pointedtoeslingbacks,gold

chunkynecklace.ShespeaksFrenchandhasasidehustle.Ithrowonsomeredlipstickandpul my hair back into a slicked back middle-part bun. I check my toilet-top reflection again. She

OceanofPDF.com

doesn'tspeakFrench.Shedoesn'thaveasidehustle.There'snothingeffortlessabouther.Sh
full of effort, of need, of "please believe I'm this." She's a kid playing dress-
up with a slicked back bun that makes her head look like an egg.

Howcansomewomenpulloffanything?
Whoevertheywanttobethatday,theygettobe.

Yetmyclothesbetrayme.Judgemewithasnidesmirkthatsays,*notquite,sweetheart*.

Ipressmyfingersintotheinnercornersofmyeyebrows,thesamewayMomdoes.Iwantto
get it right. I want to*look*right. Like a cool, chic, elegant woman who deserves
commitment.
Demandsitwithhermerepresencewithoutevenneedingtosayitoutloud.Thiswomanlooks
so good she doesn't have to beg or ask or try. This woman commands
respect. And love. The kind of love that makes a man want to be with her.
Really be with her.

3:50pm. Fuck. I throw on a dark gray, jersey bodycon dress I got on
clearance at Marshall's and a pair of slim black boots. I run to the bathroom
and climb onto the toilet. Good enough. I don't look like a clown or a kid or
totally insane. I flat iron my hair and amp up my makeup
morethanusual.Lipstain*and*gloss.Twocoatsofmascara.Evenasmokeyeye.Ballsy.Igrab
purse and at 3:57, he texts.

Mr.Korgy:Heyprettylady-
I'msosorrybutIcan'tmakeit.Iwaslookingsoforwardtoseeing you, but Gwen and
I got in a tiff and I'm stuck doing damage control. I'm doubly sorry for the
lastminutenatureofthis.Justnoticedthetime.It'sbeenhectic,tosaytheleast…
I'llmakeitup to you soon. I promise.

I collapse over myself, hyperventilating, tears and snot oozing out of me as I

type myresponse.

*noprob!*

*OceanofPDF.com*

Hereschedulesourdateforfourdayslater.Thedaysareendless,tickingbyslowlyasifthey're taunting me. My usual overeager anticipation for his texts is replaced with a gnashing fear of them. A fear that maybe he'll need to reschedule it again, push it further away.

But he doesn't. Four days later our date happens. He gets a Manhattan and I get a coke and we hold hands across the table. It's nice to be able to be fully present with one another, not skittishlylookingoveroursholders.Nowheretobeotherthanhere.Italmostfeelslikewe're regular couple.

Untilheputsonhisreadingglassestoreadthemenu.

"I didn't know you wore

glasses," I say.

Somethingaboutthenot-knowingtwistsmystomach.Makesmefeellikeasmallerpartof his life than I thought I was. What other quotidian life basics don't I know about him?

"Oh,Idon't,"hesays."Notreally.Justsometimestogradepapers.And,evidently,tosee which pasta I'd like to order. Don't wanna miss it if they've got carbonara."

HetakesinhismenuandItrytotakeinminebutsuddenlyI'veforgottenhowto.Ormaybe it'snotthatI'veforgottenbutjustthatsomehowmyoldwayoflookingatonenolongerseems

IonlygoouttoeatacoupletimesayearwithMom.UsuallyDenny's,whereIalwaysgetth GrandSlamsoIdon'tevenhavetoopenthemenu.Andifwegoanywhereelse,Izoneinonthe kidssectionandorderchickennuggetsorcheesepizza.Butthisisarealrestaurant.Andthisis real date with a real man. So I need to be a real woman, not just the body of one with a

seven-year-old'sdiet.

OceanofPDF.com

Icorrectmyposture.RunmyfingeralongtheitemsasifI'mtakingthemenuasseriouslyas
I want Mr. Korgy to take me. I jut out my chin and spew occasional
"hmm's", pretending like
theingredientsIdon'tknowareappealing.Ahyes,escabeche.Cipollini.Toum.Myoldfrien
Is this how a woman does it? How a woman reads a menu?

"Hey,thanksforbeingsoaccommodating,"hesays,joltingmeoutofmyperformance.
"About having to reschedule. I really felt like I let you down."

"Ohno,itwastotallyfine,"Ilie.Andbeautifullyso.SobeautifullythatIalmostbelievethe
lie myself.

"Well,itmeansalotthatyou'resounderstanding.It'sverymatureofyou."

"Oh, of course," I say through a convincing smile. And yet something
darker lurks underneath.Aquestion.Ishereallycomplimentingme?
DoeshereallythinkI'mmature?Oris he trying to validate what he wants me to
be, to reinforce it and ensure it going forward, to solidify the version of me
that makes his life easiest?

ThewaitertakesourordersandMr.Korgytakesacall.

"I'msosorry,"hesaystomeashebacksupthroughtherestaurant,readyinghisfingerto
swipe open the call. "So, so, sorry." And yet, despite how sorry he is, he
takes it.

I watch him through the window as he paces back and forth in the parking
lot, rubbing out a knot in his shoulder. I pee and come back but he's still on
the phone, so I get on mine and find myself where any lost soul finds
themselves: their save-for-later section on Amazon. I move
everythingtomycartandorderitall.Miniaturetweezersandfuzzyslippers,niacinamideser
and command strips so I can finally hang that picture of Mom and I that I've
been meaning to hang for four and a half years. A satin pillowcase, an

oatmeal-scented soap bar, and a seam

OceanofPDF.com

ripperforitchytags.Anightlightthatlookslikeapieceoftoast.Abagofsourcreamandonion seasoning powder that supposedly tastes just like the discontinued one from Auntie Anne's.

Ourentreesarrive.Igetarefillofmycokeandasthefoodslowlystopssteaming,somethin in me begins to stir. Something hot and scary and powerful that grows in me until eventually, finally, Mr. Korgy comes back.

"Whew,I'msosorryaboutthat,"hesays,takingaseat.

Iwillmyselftopushitdown,toforceitdown,toshovethisthingsofardownitwon'tever break the surface.

"Noworries,"Isay,butitcomesouttighterthanImeanitto.Clenchedandconstricted,lik the lie that it is. Not beautiful, not convincing. Mr. Korgy studies my face. Registers the discontent I try to bury.

"Youdidn'thavetowaitforme,"hesays."Ifeelterrible.Yourfoodprobablygotcold."

"It's fine."

Hetwirlshisforkinhispasta.

"What?" he

asks.

"Whatdoyoumean'what'?"

"Something's

the matter."

"No,nothing'sthematter.Everything's–"

"Fine?" he asks.

"Yes,"Isay.

"Something'swrong.Whatisit?""Nothing."

"Ican'treadyourmind,Waldo.MuchasIwishIcould.Pleasetalktome."

OceanofPDF.com

“Really.There’snothingtosay.”

“Okay,finethen.I’lltakeyourwordforit.”“Good.”

We each take a bite of our food and take too long to chew and I pick off a petal from the single-rosecenterpieceasIkeeptryingtoshovethisthinginmedown.Butitpokesanditpokes and it pokes.

“Canyoustoptakinghercallsaroundme?”Ifinallyask,afewdecibelstooloudandwitha piercing hostility.

Panicfloodshisfaceforamomentsofleetingit’salmostimperceptible.Almost.ButIsaw Thatlookofterror,of‘ohno,we’reoutofthehoneymoonphasewhereIcandonowrong.She’ startingtoseethroughme.Toseeme.She’sstartingtobreakthroughthesurface,likeallwom do, all of them the same with their endless pool of wants, their infatuation all-too-quicklyturning sour, blurring into hatred.’

Itwasamicro-momentoftruth,ofraw,animalemotionthathewasabletoeditsoquickly,to correctsoseamlesslythatitscaresme.Ifhe’sabletomanipulatehisownemotionssowell,wh might he be able to do with mine?

“You’reusuallysounderstanding,”hesays,hisfacesettledwithamilkylookofconcern.

It’samasterfullychosenphrase,awayofpinningtheproblembackontome,likehe’sjust the timid guy trying to make sense of his girlfriend’s ‘outburst’, which he quantifies as any emotionthatmakeshimremotelyuncomfortable,whichisanyemotionthatisn’thappinesso horniness. I would be impressed if I wasn’t so livid.

“Yeah,IsayI’munderstanding,topleaseyou,”Itellhim.“ButI’mactuallyreallyhurting hurts. When you call her in front of me.”

OceanofPDF.com

“Itook thecall outsideso youwouldn’t havetohear…”

“Igetsolittletimewithyouandthenwhatevertimeldogetisconstantlyinterruptedbyher calls and her texts and you tending to her.”

“She’smywife.”

InodandlookoutthewindowlikeJessicaChastaininanyofhermeatyroles,theweightof womankind in her deep, beautiful eyes.

“Look,I’mreallysorry,”hesays.“ThatIhavetotakeGwen’scalls.I’msurethat’shardon

“Wellcanyoujuststop?

Canyoufuckingnottakecallsfromherwhenyou’resittingacross from me?”

Myfistfallsontothetableandtheoldercoupleacrossthewaylooksoveratus.Mr.Korgy’s pleading eyes meet mine.

“Waldo,I’mdoingthisforus.HowamIsupposedtokeepseeingyouifshe’sontome? Ifshe gets suspicious?”

Istirmycokewiththestraw,sulkyandpetulant.*Iwantmore*,Iwanttosay.Orwhine.Or scream.*Give me more.*But instead I just keep stirring.

“Look,Waldo,”Mr.Korgysays,repositioninghimself.“You’reincontrolhere,okay?”

He says the words with such conviction that I want to believe them. I want to believe that he knowssomethingthatIdon’t.Thathisversionofrealityistherealone.Thatthere’ssomeshad to this that I’m missing. Something I’m not seeing because of being so wrapped up in it. So obsessive about it. So fanatic. If only I could zoom out. Then I could see what he sees. That I am, in fact, in control. Instead of feeling so out of it.

*OceanofPDF.com*

“Iwanttodothisonyourtermsandyourtermsonly,”hesays.“Ifthiseverstopsworkingfo
you or feeling good for you, we can stop. We will stop,” he says, like it’s a kind thing to say.

AndI’msurethatitis.Iknowthatitis.Thathe’ssayingittoprotectme.Sowhythendoesit feel like a threat?

“Idon’twannastop,”Isay,myeyesshootinguptohim,hungryandwild,survivalmode clicking in.

“Are you sure?” heasks.

I’mnotsurehowinthematteroftensecondsIsomersaultedfrombeingtheoneseeking reassurancefromhimtobeingtheoneaskedtogiveittohimbutIwanttostickthelandingrega

“I’msure,”Isay.“Idon’twanttostop.”

And so we agree to drop the issue and have a good night together. He tells me about his teenage summers at his aunt’s house in Cape Cod, eating salt-and-vinegar chips and watching theIndependenceDayparadewhiletheunclehedidn’tlikeverymuchtoldhimhowheought live his life. He tells me about the year he was vegan, the year he spent backpacking through Thailand, and the year he worked as a baggage handler for American Airlines and how that taught him to never overpack again. I tell him about Mom sneaking me into matinee movies underhercoat,R-ratedonesIprobablyshouldn’thaveseenatfour,*Bridesmaids*and*LikeCrazy*and*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. I tell him about summers at Frannie’s and how our friendshipisslowlydissolvingthemorewefigureoutwhoweeachare.Itellhimaboutthetim Mom booked tickets for us to go and visit my dad in California once they’d reconnected in their mid-twentiesandshebelievedtheymightgetbacktogether,butthensomebitchtaggedhimina

OceanofPDF.com

pictureonfacebooksoMomcanceledthetripandthespraytanshehadscheduledforitandshe said “Never get on a plane for a man. No man is worth the price of airfare.”

Weordertwodesserts,aseven-layercakeandacremebrulee.Wecrackthecremebruleeand we eat the cake and Mr. Korgy pays the tab and he doesn’t even have to count on his fingers to know how much to tip. We scootch out of the booth and the waiter taps Mr. Korgy on the arm and says, “I just have to let you know, you seem like such a good dad.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

Hiccupsandsnot,saltytearsandbrokenbloodvesselsaroundmyeyes.Itriedmybesttokeep this part of me contained, but the seal finally broke.

Hesitsnexttomeinthedriver'sseatontheFridaybeforespringbreak.Hescratcheshis beard while stale heat blasts onto us.

"Idon'twannago,"hesays."Ifit'sanyconsolation.Ireallydon'twannago.Webookedth tickets eight months ago. Non-refundable…"

"Howlongwillyoubegonefor?"Iask.

"Six nights," he

says. "A week."

HegoesonbutIhearnothing,hiswordsfuzzy.Cottoninmyears.Iinterruptthim,cryingth I was looking forward to spring break, and that I thought we'd be able to spend time together.

Heapologizesandsaysthatmaybeheshouldhavetoldmesooner.Thathedidn'twantmetob stressedforanylongerthanIneededtobe,sohewaiteduntilthelastpossiblesecondtotellme, thinking that's what would be best for me. And I say what would be best for me is having him.

AndthenIleanoverandgotounziphispants,buthestopsme,ortriesto,butIkeeptuggingon the zipper and I reach in to try to pull his dick out so I can suck it and show him how much I need him, but he grabs my hand.

"Waldo,no,"hesays.Andhelooksatmewithafunnylookandsayshe'sconcernedabout what all this is doing to me. And I laugh through my tears to try to be more lighthearted and I look at him while I'm laugh-crying with snot dribbling into my mouth and I say:

"Don'tbe concerned.This is good.This is great.This is exactlywhat Iwant."

OceanofPDF.com

I stab the country fried chicken with my fork and shove a bite into my mouth. I dial my mom. I can'tchew.Thechickentasteslikewoodchips.Itslidesbackoutofmymouthandontothe TV dinner tray. The phone rings. I try for some corn instead and force myself to swallow. I need to get something in my body besides Gushers. Those and a half a piece of plain toast are all I've been able to eat in the two days since he left on spring break.

"Hello? Hun? Can ya hear me?" Mom asks before I have time to say anything, like she's confusedaboutwhatexactlyaphoneisandhowitworks.Ormaybeshe'sjustconfusedthatI' calling. I haven't done it very often since I was thirteen and I called to tell her our AC wasbroken.

"Alright, I'll call the handyman," she sighed. It was a haggard, hopeless sigh that I knew wasn'taboutme.Itwasabouthercraplifeandallthepiecesofitthatwouldn'tstopfallingapar and still won't. I understood in that moment how shitty it was to be an adult. Or a poor one at least. Always underwater with life's nuisances. Solving problems you didn't make with money you don't have. I didn't want to add any more nuisances to her day.

Stilldon't.ButtodayIneedto.Ineedsomeone.IthoughtaboutcallingFrannie,butshe'si Missouri at her parents' lakehouse, jumping off decks and singing campfire songs and eating watermelon and hot dogs fresh off the grill, bubbly and sun-soaked.

"Hun,canyouhearme?"Momasksagain.

“Yeah. Hi, Ma.”

“Welliseverythingokay?

Tony’sgrabbin’somepopcornbutourmovie’sabouttostart.”“Everything’s…”

*OceanofPDF.com*

I stop before my voicecracks.

He brought me a bouquet of lilacs as a parting gift before he left for his trip and I said they were beautiful and he said I was beautiful. We had sex in the back of his car and looked at the starsandashebrushedmyhairabsentmindedlywithhisfingers,Icouldtellhewassomewhere else. I even asked him, twice, if something was the matter. And he said no. But I knew something was. The air doesn't just get thicker for no reason.

"While I'm out of town, can we email instead of text?" he asked. "I'll be stuck in a shoebox otelroom,andIdon'tthinkit'dbegoodifmyphonewasblowingup.Email'smorediscreet."

Hereadmyfaceandadded,"Butonlyifyou'reokaywithit."EventhoughheknewIwould be. If I wasn't okay with it, I wouldn't have access to him at all. I had to be okay with it.

"That'sfine.Emailitis."

"Wonderful,"hesaid."Infact,tellyouwhat.I'llwriteyouassoonasIland."

Buthelandedlastnight.8:20pm.Almosttwenty-fourhoursago.Itrackedhisflight.Andstill nothing in my inbox. My mind's gone to the worst places. Flashes of him in a high-rise New York City hotel room with velvet curtains, fucking Gwen because that's what you do when you save up for a trip. You put pressure and expectation on it and you get your money's worth by rekindling the spark that died long ago. Or at least pretending to rekindle it, the way anyone can when they're two glasses of wine deep in their best derbies on their way back from a Broadway show, tipsily swiping their hotel room key. She pulls her unmentionables out of the suitcase and throws them on in the bathroom while he grabs a shot bottle of Grey Goose out of the minibar, worrying he may have tapped some other shot

bottles in his efforts and that he'll be charged for them but figuring he'll call the front desk to dispute the charges later. He chugs the Grey Goose, thinking that right now, she's more important. They're more important. The reason for this

*OceanofPDF.com*

whole overpriced fucking trip is more important. To rekindle the spark. Or pretend to. So he jams his half-soft erection into her and she moans her counterfeit moan until mid-coital, somethingshifts.Theperformancestartstotake,andbecomereal,andineachother'sgazeth see reflected all the love they thought they'd lost but realize they're still fighting for.

I can't compete with that. What am I gonna do, send him nudes? It sounds so feeble and simultaneously over-reaching. A picture of my tits sent over gmail. So instead I sit here in Alaska, the most libidoless state, the state of mooses and bears and frostbite and boring, ugly people,waitingeagerlyforhimtoreachout,tryingtoignorethetwisted,acidicfeelinginmy gut that tells me he won't.

I'vethoughtaboutemailinghim.I'vedraftedtwo.Oneanangrier,moreaggressivehue.T other the more*xoxo, no worries if not!*type. The bifurcation of every woman. The splitpersonalities.

I've refrained from sending them, just barely. I know that that would be a step too far. It wouldbe*toomuch*.Thewaymenbecomeparalyzedbyanywhiffofawoman'smoredisturbi emotions. The way they can't tolerate being needed. Or even, sometimes, wanted.

"Honey, you there?" Mom asks, and I let her voice wash over me, and for a second I feel soothed.Likejusthervoiceisenough.Likeitdoesn'tmatterifshegetsmeordoesn't,ispresen with me or isn't, our biological connection transcends our fundamental disconnection.

"Thisdamnphone,"shesays."Ithinkwe'rebreakin'up,doll,Ican'thearyou…"

“No, the phone’s not– I stopped talking.”

“Tony,wouldjagetmeadietcoke?!Ohyoualreadypaid?

Nevermindthen!”shecallsout. “Sorry hun, what was that?”

“Nothing.It’sokay.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

“Wellwhy’dyacall,doll?

Iseverythingalright?”sheasks,andthen,inthepause,hertone shifts with

realization. “What’s goin’ on, sweetheart?”

“Comeon,babe!We’vegottahurry.Previewsstarted,”Tonyshoutshalf-

drunkfrom somewhere beyond.

“Sweetheart?” Mom asksagain.

“Uh,nothing,”Isay.“Justwantedtosayhi.”

“Oh, well that’s so

nice, hun.”

“Babe!”Tonycallsagain.

“I’msosorry,hun,I’vegottarun,”shesays.“Butnicetalkingwithyou.I’llprobablyspen

the night at Tony’s so I’ll see ya in the morning.”

“Right.Sure.”

“Igotyousomeofthosecountryfriedchickenfrozendinners.Thatgoodbrandyoulike,n

the skimpy kind.”

“Isaw.I’meatingonerightnow.”

“Oh, good

good.”

“BABE!”

“I’mcomin’,Tony!”sheshouts.“Ireallygottarun.Loveyou,honey.”

Shehangsup.Ichuckmycountryfriedchickeninthetrash.It’sashame.Itwasthegoodbr

OceanofPDF.com

Igetmyworstcustomersonmybaddays.WomenwithfrozenBotoxfaces,unhappywiththei
husbands and taking it out on me with their demands. Women with overflowing arms, their grease-stained pretzel bags pressing against my body as I sift through racks of bras they'd be able to sift through themselves if they weren't carrying seven bags of shit they don't need. Has anyone ever gone into Talbots and come out a better woman?

"Well check in the back!" A lady orders me, not seeming to realize that we live in the twenty-firstcentury,andthattheautomatizationofstoreinventorymeansthere'snomarginof error, so no need for me to.

"Oursystemshowswe'recompletelysoldoutofthatparticulardemi-bra,butI'llcertainlygo check in the back for you," I say, placating her and giving myself a chance to breathe.

Inthebreakroom,onecoworkereatsyogurtinthecornerandanothertalksonthephonew her boyfriend, using a cooing baby-voice to tell him how much she misses him and needs him and can't stand when they're "apawt".

It makes me want to throw up. Not the baby-voice, surprisingly, but the fact that what she's sayingremindsmeofhim.Everythingremindsmeofhim.EverySubaruSUVIpass,everygr baseball cap, every cardigan, every toddler, every wife, everything that's blue.

I've purchased five online carts in the past ninety-six hours. Thirty-two items of clothing that willinevitablywindupinalandfillsomewhere,expandingmycarbonfootprintandcontribu

to global warming, just because I'm fickle. Because there's a new hemline that's trendier.

Because in three months I'll decide I don't want them anymore, which seems like a thing I should've known to begin with, considering they were never really the thing that I wanted inthe

*OceanofPDF.com*

firstplace.Theywerejustsmaller,moreattainablethingstowant.Placeholdersforthebigger insatiable, incorrigible want underneath.

And yet knowing the pattern doesn't stop it. I'm powerless over the need to gorge myself on stupidthingsIputtoomuchmeaningon.StupidthingsIknowI'llbedisappointedbyassoona I see them in person - the colors not as bright, the fit too droopy, the construction absolute shit, like a fifth grader's arts-and-crafts project.

Igrabsomeicefromthebreakroomfreezerandholditonmycheekswithmybarehand,no even bothering with a paper towel. Yogurt stares at me, but Babyvoice doesn't even notice, so wrapped up in her own little world.

"I'msogladwehaveeachother,"Babyvoicesaysintothephone."You'retheonlyperson the world who gets me."

Ichucktheiceinthetrashandheadbacktothesalesfloor,shakingthemeltediceoffmy dripping hands.

"Did you find it?" the demi-bra ladybarks.

"No, we're sold out," I say, "But we have a lot of other demi-bras you can choose from." "Ulch,"the lady huffs,like I've justsuggested she pluck herpubic hairs oneby one andknit themintoascarf."No.Idon'twantadifferentdemi-bra.Iwantthatone.That'stheoneIwant." "Right," I say, monotone. "I know."

OceanofPDF.com

I haven't slept in five nights. Gray-brown rings have formed under my eyes. My clothes are baggier,mylipsaredrier,myhairisthinner.Ishutmyeyesandtakeadeepbreath,convincing myself that what I'm about to do is not deranged. That, actually, it's a good thing. That it will comfortme.Makemefeelgood.Andthathewouldwantthatforme.Formetofeelgood.So, by association, he would want me to do this.

I know I'm only rationalizing, and on a good day I know that there's nothing more insane thanawoman'srationalizationstoherselfaboutaman,buttodayisnotagoodday.SotodayI believe them as I park on the street outside of his house.

Icutacrosshislawnandsliparoundbacktotrythebackdoorknob,half-expectinganalarm, my body rushing with the thought. Then the cops would come and maybe there'd be a female and she'd ask, "Why were you breaking and entering?" as she snapped the cuffs on me and I'd say, "To be close to him. I just wanted to be close to him." And she'd look at me with understanding.Maybethat'sallthisrabidpartofmewants-tobeunderstood.Toknowthatit's not crazy or troubled or wrong. That this is just what it feels like to want an unavailable man.

No alarm, but the door is locked. I go to the side of the house. The bathroom window is crackedopen,justbarely.Igrabalargerockfromthegardenbedandstandonitsoicanreach.

What am I doing? Is this who I've become? What do I even do when I get inside? I hadn't thought that far ahead. I never think far enough ahead. That's

my issue. I'm so ruled by the present. Buddhists talk about living in the present like it's the antidote to all of life's problems but it's not. Living in the present is the worst problem. You don't learn from your mistakes and youdon'tconsidertheconsequences.Youjustact;Youjustdo.Livinginthepresentmightw

OceanofPDF.com

ifyou're amuslin-wrapped monk with a vow of celibacy and nothing to do all day but roam the Zen gardens, but if you're an actual living, breathing human being, living in the present is a disaster.

I crawl in through the window and dust myself off. My stomach flutters with the feeling someone must get when crossing over to the other side and witnessing God himself open up the pearly gates to their presence. *I made it*, they think, *to heaven*.

The mudroom is cluttered with raincoats and hats and Gwenyth's scarves and purses and Gregory's toddler-sized Converse sneakers. I kick off my shoes and hang my puffer jacket up next to a bouclé coat of Gwen's, like I'm just another regular house guest. I run my hands along all the hanging pieces like a woman in a clothing store, entranced by the beauty of the things surrounding her and the possibility that those things could be hers, until I get to Mr. Korgy's cardigan. It's a chunky knit mocha color with suede elbow pads and tortoise shell buttons. I breathe into it, getting high off the fumes of him. The suggestion of him. Nothing turns me on like a man who's not really there.

I gouptoKorgy'sbedroomandflipon the light. The bed is made, tight and immaculate. I enter the en-suite restroom and open and close every drawer, inspecting what's inside, like knowing what brand of antacid Mr. Korgy prefers will somehow bring me closer to him. Or what brand of hair gel. Or pomade. Or mousse. I didn't know a guy needed all three.

I rummage under the sink-roll of toilet paper and folded hand towels and nail clippers and mouthwash and, toward the back, Mr. Korgy's cologne bottle. Jean Paul Gaultier. I hold it clo

to my heart, like a child clutching their big gift on Christmas morning.

I get on the bed and straddle the cologne bottle. I imagine Mr. Korgy nailing me, pants aroundhisanklesbecausehecouldn'tevenwaittotakethemoff.Gwenyth'sinthecorner,

OceanofPDF.com

watching us, hurt in her eyes as he rams into me over and over again. And I smirk at her, relishinginthefactthat,forthismoment,Iamthechosenone.Theoneheispleasing.Theone he lusts for. The one he makes love to. And she is just his wife. The one he hammers out logistics with. The one he quietly resents. The one he "makes it work" with.

WhenI'mdone,Istraightenoutthecomforterandlookatthebottle,mywetnessstill gleaming on it.

I flick off the light, go to the kitchen and grab a bag of sriracha popcorn, then I go to the den andpoweronthefamilydesktopcomputer.Iriflethroughthefoldersuntil Ispotonethatpique myinterest:homevideos.Iclickonitandaslewoffilespopsup.Gregory's1stbirthday! Xmas 2022! Disney Day! So many exclamation points! If ever there was an overcompensating punctuation mark! I click on 'Wedding Day!'

IeathandfulsofpopcornsobigthatIcoughwhilethebluelightfromthescreenglowson myface.IwatchwithgrossintrigueasKorgygetsreadywithhisgroomsmen.AsGwenyth's makeup artist applies makeup and Gwenyth flashes a sly smile to the camera. As Korgy and Gwenyth laugh into each other's faces the way newlyweds do, like they're trying to prove a point to everyone around. WE'RE HAPPY. WE'RE SO HAPPY. Exclamation point.

Korgy's best man gives a toast, and then Gwenyth's maid of honor. Korgy and Gwenyth dancetheirfirstdance.KorgykissesGwenyth'scheekinthesamewayhekissesmine,likesh the only woman in the world. Like he adores her. Like she's all that matters to him. I touch my cheek where hers was kissed.

Thevideoends.Irollupthepopcornbagandtossitinthetrash.Iheaddownstairs,puton

my shoes and jacket, crawl back out the window, and drive home.

OceanofPDF.com

“ButIloveyou,”Isay,andwithintwoseconds,IalreadywishthatIhadn’t.Thewordshangin the air in that constipated way they do when you know that you shouldn’t have said them. That you’ve gone too far. The room starts to look crooked. The clock on the wall ticks, each flick of the second hand punctuating my nausea.

Iwanttoaddsomething,toclarify,tobackpedal,ormorethanthattotakethewordsaway. ButIcan’t.They’reoutintheopen.TheworstpartisIdidn’tevenmeantosaythem.I’dbeen careful about not saying them. I’d been saving them up for just the right moment, which of course is whatever moment follows him saying them first. I thought it would be tender and romantic. I figured it had to happen soon. But then this happened instead.

Hetextedmeanhourago,apologizingforbeingabsentwhilehewasonvacationandaskin if I was alone and at home because he needed to talk to me about something. There was a stiffness to the text. A backslide into a formalness that we’d outgrown. My body already knew.

I paced around and changed into a jumpsuit and put on what makeup I could, one eye mascara’dwhenheknockedonthedoor.Therewassomethingintheknock.Aresignation.M heart dropped out of my asshole. Still, I mascara’d my other eye.

Hesatonthecouch.Hedidn’twantabeverage.Hisspeechwasrehearsed.Staccatoandev and with too many platitudes for a writing teacher.*I’ve had a lot of time to think. Everythinghappens for a reason. I think we need a break. This space will be good for us.*

I noted how he carefully avoided the word breakup, choosing

instead to go for more open-endedwords,softerwords,curatedwords.Wordslikebreak.Space.Process.Time.

OceanofPDF.com

Friends.Recalibrate.WordsthatIknowbetterthantobelievebecauseI'veheardMomrelay them to me dozens of times with wild, hungry hope behind her eyes.

"No,no,it'snotabreakup,"she'llsaytome."It'sa*break*.Justabreak."

Or "He said he still really wants to stay friends."

Or"Hejustneedsalittlespace.Buthe'scomingback.Iknowhe'scomingback."

And the worst part is he does. He always comes back. That's why he said those softer words inthefirstplace,tokeephisoptionsopen.Sothat,whenhegetsespeciallylonelyandhornyon night, he has her, still hoping, still an option. Her, receiving him with open arms and a steaming vagina. Her, who he can come back to, cashing in on the empty promises of his softer words with a brief stint where he tries her on for size a couple last times just to confirm what healready knows - that he's moved on and is ready to discard her.

Butknowingbetterthantobelievehiswordsdoesnothingwhenyoulovetheguy.Ifyoulo him, you just believe them. You believe him. You need to. You cling to his promises. You say "But I love you".

Herubshishandsbackandforthandfinallylooksupatme,hisfacebeetredandballooning

"Oh, Waldo," he says, pleading. And then he pops.

Hisshouldershunchoverandhisbodytwitchesintightconvulsions.Ihughimandhistear drip onto my chest. A long string of snot wobbles back and forth. He wipes it with his sleeve.

"Don'tsaythat,Waldo.Pleasedon'tsaythat."

"Ican'thelpit.Ijustdo.Idon'tthinkweshouldtakespaceorabreakorwhatever.Ican make this work. Because I love you."

"Iwishyoudidn't.God,Iwishyoudidn't,"hesobs."I'madisappointment.ToGwenyth, my parents, to myself, to you."

OceanofPDF.com

“You’renotadisappointmenttome.”

“Ishouldbe!

Waldo,myhair’sthinning,mygut’sgrowing,andI’msadmostofthetime.My in-laws pay most of my family’s bills. I’m a fucking high school teacher.*Your*high school teacher.Ishould’vewalkedaway.Ishouldn’thavecaved.I’msupposedtobestrongerthanth Bigger than that. I’m supposed to be the adult here.”

“Hey,hey,”Isay.“I’mgladyoucaved.Iwantthis.Iwantyou.”

“Butyoushouldn’t,”hewails.“Thisisunfair,whatI’mdoingtoyou.It’snotright.”

“Howcanitnotberight?

Beingaroundyouisthe*only*thingthatfeelsright.Theonlything that’s ever felt right to me.”

“Thingsthatarerightshouldn’thurtyoulikethis.You’rehurtingsomuchandIseethat.Is the pain this is causing you.*I’m*causing you. And I need to stop it.”

Hewipeshisnosewithhissleeveagainandhiscryingsteadiesasistrokehisback.Ipullhir close and rest my head on his, tracing the back of his hand like he’s my child who woke up from a scary nightmare and I’m his parent gently soothing him back to sleep.

“Waldo, what we’re doing is wrong,” he says. “What I’m doing. I feel guilty about it every day.Ihaveafamily,abeautifulfamilywhoIcan’tbepresentwithforevenasecondbecauseal I can think about is you. All I want is you.”

“Youhaveme.”

Hejerksaway,hisfacetwistingwithself-loathing.“Butyoudon’thavemebecausehowcan you?! That weighs on me, the things I can’t give you that I want to so badly. I feel terrible. I’m taking

something from you that you can never get back. Your first experience of love. A thing that's supposed to be special and delicate and wonderful."

"But it is all of those things, with you. Ipromise."

*OceanofPDF.com*

"Waldo, please, stop. You're young and beautiful. You have your whole life ahead of you. Eventually, you're gonna resent me and you're gonna say I robbed the cradle and you're gonna regretme.I'mscaredofthat.I'mfuckingterrifiedofthat.Idon'twanttobeoneofyourregrets when you're the best thing that's happened to me in years."

"I'm not gonna regretyou."

"But you*should*regret me. I*deserve*for you to regret me. Do you understand? I do not deserve you. Do you hear me? You're pretty and smart and capable and young. Your life's not madeupforyoulikemineisforme.Youcouldhaveanyone,youcoulddoanything.Youhave your potential. Don't waste your potential on me."

Mr.Korgypullsmeinandkissesthetopofmyheadoverandoveragain.

"I'mjust… I'msoconfused,Waldo.I'msofuckingconfused.Noonetellsyouyou'regonna be thirty-nine and still so fucking lost. I need to make this whole situation better. I wanna do right by you and the best way of doing that is to end things now, before they get worse. This is what we need to do. I'm just trying to do right by you."

Ikeephugginghimandhekeepscryinguntilhehastoleave.Thedoorshutsbehindhimand I stare at it. I was so caught up in his speeches and his feelings and him that I only now realize that, technically, he never said he loves me back.

*OceanofPDF.com*

“He’sanabuser,”Franniesays,juttingoutherchin.“Whatasick,sickman.Thisisabsolutely
een!”

“Frannie,please.It’snotlikethat.Hedidn’t–”

“He did.

He*abused*you.”

Ishould’venevertoldher.Itwasamomentofweakness.That’stheproblemwithpain.It rattles you. Makes you lose sight of yourself and lean on the wrong people. The people who pervert being leaned on. Make it into a sign of their superiority.

“You know what we’re gonna do?” she asks, pacing around her bedroom with a put-on
toughnessevenasshewearsthefluffiestslippersIhaveeverseen.“We’regonnareportit.Get
him fired, maybe even arrested.”

I’veneverseenherthisexcited.SellingthemostGirlScoutcookiesinhertroopwasaclose second, but this wins. She’s trying her best to hide her excitement behind faux outrage, but it’s still there. She’s glowing with opportunity, the opportunity to turn my heartbreak into her shining moment.

Icanseeittoo.Frannieonthelocalnews,wearingherfavoritesweaterandthatplumshade of lipstick she doesn’t realize she doesn’t pull off, bobbing her head as she listens to some
long-distance news anchor feed her questions through herearpiece.

“Right,whenmybestfriendtoldme,IknewIhadtodosome-
theen,”she’dsay,“Forthe greater good. For her and for our community.”

ItellherIdon’twantthat.Thatit’soverbetweenusanywayandthatifshereporteditI’dbe

known forever as the homewrecker who fucked her high school teacher.

OceanofPDF.com

“Iknow,asmybestfriend,youwouldn’twanttodothattome,”Isay,exploitingFrannie’s own technique against her.

She ever-so-slightly squints at me, knowing what I’m doing but unable to address it because she’d out herself as having done it too. Here we are, locked in the dark underbelly offriendship.

Franniegrabsherglassoflemonadeoffofhernightstandwiththepetunia-shapedtopand takes a sip as she decides her next move.

“Waldo,hecouldpreyonsomebodyelse.Abusesomebodyelse–”

“Hedidn’tabuseme,Frannie.Hehaddeepfeelingsforme,”Isay,andIhatethewayIsoun when I say it. Like a woman who calls her boyfriend her*partner*. The stink of desperation to make his commitment more than it is while she crosses her fingers, praying for her shut-up ring.

Frannielooksatme,herlipquiveringwithself-importance,likeshe’sasocialworkerina Lifetime original movie, here to save the poor, beaten foster child. She needs this. She needs Korgy to be a bad guy and me to be a victim, because it lets her be the savior. Gives her something to be up in arms about. A righteous cause. A purpose.

“Wally,yousoundlikeyou’vebeengroomed.”

TheMormonwhobelievesshegetsherownplanetwhenshediesisscoldingmeaboutbei groomed.Iwanttolaugh,butinsteadmyfacegrowshotandtwitchy,andIfoldovermyselfan start to cry.

“Imisshim,”Isay,softeningasIlookupather.“Idon’tknowwhattodo.He’sallIthink about. He’s the best thing that ever happened to me. I love him, Frannie. I just love him.”

I hate my cry-voice, how high and shrill and strangled it sounds, and my cry-face, how

blotchyitgets.ButFranniedoesn’tseemtomindthem.Ifanything,sheseemstolikethem.

OceanofPDF.com

Appreciatethem.Empathizewiththem.Shesitsnexttomeandherfaceshiftsintoan expression of child-like somberness.

"Hey,heyit'sokay,"shesays."Ifyoureallydon'twanttoreportthiswedon'thaveto."

Thensheleansforwardandsqueezesmyhandwithhers."AndWaldo,didyouknowthisi the first time you've cried in front of me?"

Thisis why Idon't cry infront of others. Becausepeople like Frannieuse tears asa

fucked-

upcurrency.Theymistaketearsasacomplimenttotheircaretaking,theirhand-

holding. The tears make them feel bigger than, better than. Make them think you're weak. Vulnerable.

Andyourweaknessgivesthemsomethingtodo.Somethingtofeelpowerover.

"No," I say. "No, I didn't."

"Itis,"shenods."It'sthefirsttimeyou'vecriedinfrontofme."

And her eyes twinkle like it's a compliment

to her.

OceanofPDF.com

I've been lying in bed for nearly a week. Dipping my hand into a family-size box of Frosted Flakesduringepisodesof*Survivor*.Ibreakdowninchokedsobsas JeffProbstsnuffsatorch.

Ihaven't gone toschool. Or work.Covid, once a deadlyepidemic, is nowjust a goodexcuse.

A solid lie to lean on when you're debilitated fromsadness.

InbetweensobsessionsIreadourtextexchangesoverandover.IsmelltheclothesIwore around him. Mom's too cheap to buy tissues so I use toilet paper instead. A roll a day. Store-brand,single-ply,thekindthatrubsyourawbutitdoesthejob.

Thisisfarworsethanthedullacheoflonelinessortheskin-crawlofanxiety.I'mdrowning in a vat of all my worst fears, that I'm unlovable and unworthy and too much.

I want to be grateful that I'm feeling so much. Unthawed after years of being numb.Mr.

Korgy unlocked something in me, a depth that I didn't know was there before. Maybe gratitude will come with time. Maybe someday I'll stop crying because it's over and will smile because it happened or whatever. Or maybe that's just one of those things people say to keep sad people chuggingforwardsotheydon'thavetodealwiththem,like"It'llgetbetter"and"Timehealsa wounds." Maybe time doesn't heal wounds and it won't get better and I'll never stop crying because it's over.

Jeffsnuffsanothertorch.

*OceanofPDF.com*

My first day back at school, he gives me nothing. I didn't expect much. A glance maybe, longing or apologetic, I'd have taken either. A quick, nondescript compliment on my last homework assignment. A graze of my shoulder as he passed by me. Some small gesture indetectabletoanyoneelse,butonethatIcouldloadwithmeaningandpossibilityanddevou the privacy of my own mind. One that would confirm all that we shared, all that we were. Or even that we were anything at all.

Butinstead,nothing.He'sgonecold.Completelyunyielding.Helooksoverme,through but never at me. And I sit in my plastic chair, destroyed.

*OceanofPDF.com*

“Hey,youalright?”

IshutmylockerandseeNolanstandingthere,handsstuffedinhispockets,alookofconce
on his oatmeal face.

“Mm-
hmm,”Isay.Ileavebuthefollows.HeasksifI’msure,thenifthere’sanythingIwant
to talk about, then says that he’s here to listen if I want to talk, then tells me he’s a pretty good listener, and proceeds to go on a long-winded speech about just how good of a listener he is.

“IwassixyearsoldthefirsttimeIheardIwasone,”hesaysaswewalkthroughthehallway.
“On the porch of my childhood home in Louisville, licking a lollipop. Grape. I still remember the flavor. The mailman came up to drop some mail, but he seemed down - heavy - so I asked if he was sad. And then all of the sudden he just started cryin’ and tellin’ me about how his wife had just left him, then he started goin’ into his whole life story. He must’ve gone on for twenty minutes. Then he wraps up and slings his mailbag over his shoulder and turns to me and says, “Kid, you’re the best listener I’ve ever seen” and walks away. So, yeah, anyway, I’m a good listener… Typically. In most scenarios. Unless I’m nervous. Like right now. Where I’m doing absolutely one hundred percent of the talking.”

Nolan scratches his ear and I look around the corridor at the pockets of students. Girls
twirlingtheirhairandgossiping,boysinbaggyclotheslaughing,apairflirting,aguykicking
hackysack.Iwanttobelikethem.Exceptforthehackysack.ThatIdon’twant.Butotherwise,
I want to be like them. Like people my age. People who have things in

common with other people my age. I'm tired of my terminal otherness, of always feeling like I'm on the outside looking in. Maybe it could be good to try to fit in. To try to be like them. To try to be my age.

*OceanofPDF.com*

I turn to face Nolan. “Do you want to go out sometime?”

OceanofPDF.com

Nolanthrowstheaxanditconnectswiththetarget.Ithrowmineanditmisses.Helooks relieved. No guy's ego can handle a girl whose ax hits closer to the bullseye.

Afterafewroundsofaxtossing,wegotoWildScoops,theicecreamparlorupthestreet.I feel a bug crawling up my arm and go to swat it away when I realize that it's not a bug. It's Nolan'shand,strokingmewithatimiditythatgivesawayjusthowbadlyhe'sbeenwantingto do this. My arm prickles with goosebumps, the bad kind, the nails-on-a-chalkboard repulsed kind. The kind that come from being touched by someone who isn't Korgy.

"Doyouwantmetomovemyhand?"heasks.

Yes, I think.

"No,"Isay.

"Can I kiss you?" heasks.

Igrabhisfaceandshovemytongueinhisthroat,attemptingtotransferallmypassioninto his mouth, hoping it can work that way. Hoping that I can take all of my pulsing feelings for another person and pour them into this one. That I can like him the way I want to if I just pretend he's someone else. Isn't wanting to like someone the same as liking them? Or at least close enough?

After a minute, Nolan pulls away, disheveled and awakened. I didn't feel anything, but he seems to have. And maybe that's enough. One for two. Maybe it doesn't matter that my body feels cold and limp against his. That my mind races, detached. Maybe it's good that I don't feel passionforhim.Maybepassionisbadforme.Unhelpful.Makesmecrazyandunstable.May it's better this way.

OceanofPDF.com

“Isn’tthisplacethecutest?”Frannieasks,lookingaroundthediner.“Ilovehowitfeelslikewe time-traveled right back to the 50s.”

Nolan and Tristan and I nod in agreement. We all order food and force our way to a polite piecemeal conversation until, as if sent by God, our milkshakes arrive. We pretend not to use them as the crutches that they are, longer and longer sips saving us from the strain of lacking chemistry,thepocketswhereourgroupdisconnecthitsalittletoopalpably.Iremindmyselft be present, to be positive. That we’re trying. We’re all trying.

Nolan tells a story about shitting his pants on stage during his kindergarten’s production of Peter Pan. Frannie looks horrified and Tristan listens intently, too intently, like someone who’s not really listening but trying to show you how hard they’re listening and is actually thinking about how their hair looks. I laugh along and Nolan takes my hand and I let him. And I breathe into it. And I tell myself this is good. This is healthy. This is right. Tentative hand-holds, fumbling identities, wobbly punchlines to stories that were rehearsed in front of mirrors. Sweet double-dateswithinnocent,unchallengingconversations.Thisiseighteen.Icandothis.Icanbehere

“Ohmygod,isthatMr.Korgy?That’sMr.Korgy,”Nolansays.

I turn to see where he’s looking and there he is. Sitting at a corner booth at the far side of the restaurant from us, across the table from Gwen and Gregory. Gwen’s moving her hands a lot, in themiddleofananimatedstorythatKorgylookslikehecouldn’tbepayinglessattentionto.H pokeshisforkaroundabsentmindedly,occasionallythrowinginagestureofpolitecontribu A head tilt that’s a little overdone, a chuckle with unhumorous eyes. And I

feel a pang of hope

OceanofPDF.com

thathe'sthisremovedfromhislife.Thathismindisclearlyelsewhere,probablyonmethewa
mine is on him. I will him to feel me, to feel my presence, to look up at me and know that I see him, but he just keeps staring at his plate.

"Should we say hi to him?" Nolanasks.

"Definitelynot,"Franniesayssharply,hereyeslockingonmine.

And then our food arrives - hamburgers and a plate of chili cheese fries for the table - and I trytorefocusasTristanbowshisheadperformativelythenlooksuplikeaboybandmemberin atweenmagazinephotoshoot,bitinghislipandraisinghiseyebrowsuntilhisforeheadcrink with that put-on look of surprise-meets-bedroom-eyes-meets-squinting-into-the-sun.

"Wouldanyonebeoffendedifisayapre-mealprayerforthegroup?"heasks.Frannielooks like she might cum.

TristanstartstoprayandIbegmybodynottoturnaround.Ibargainwithit.IfIcanjustnot turn around, I'll buy myself a dress later. Or a bag. A hobo bag. Or a structured bag. Whatever kind of bag will make me not turn around.

ButIhearthebellsontheentrancedoorjingleandIcan'tnot.Mr.Korgyholdsthedoorope for Gwen and Gregory, then he glances up directly at me and freezes. Until Gwen calls him, and hestartles,andhethrowsonafake,husbandlysmileandfollowsafterher.Ashevanishesoutc my life and returns to his, I excuse myself and head to the restroom. I lock myself in a stall and start to text him that I miss him and that I have to see him and then delete the text and go to his Instagrampageandmasturbatetoitwithmychilicheesefingers.Thechiliburnsmyvagina.E I keep going and going while that song that goes "sh'boom sh'boom life could be a dream"plays in the background.

OceanofPDF.com

I have become the worst stereotype of a scorned woman. If I can even be called one. What marksthetiteofpassagefromgirltowoman?Acertainage? Abrokenheart?Afed-upness?A realbra?Usingpadstocatchpost-periodspottinginsteadofstuffingyourunderwearwithwads of toilet paper?

I don't know exactly what it takes to be considered a woman, but I know that right now, as I sitthereinmyparkedcaroutsidehishouse,baseballcaphoodingmyface,eatingajumbobago honey mustard Kettle Chips, I feel like one. Or at least angry enough to be one.

I didn't even know it was his fucking birthday when I decided to drive over here. And I didn't even really decide to drive over here. The thought no sooner entered my mind than my hands were on my steering wheel, zero lag time between thought and action. I drove over in a trance,thestoplightsblurryasImanicallyconsideredwhatIbelievedtobegenuinepossibili basedsolelyontheonelookwesharedatthediner.*IcantexthimI'moutfrontofhishouseandh run into my arms. He'll confess how much he's missed me. How much he needs me.*

AndthenIgottohisstreetandthedoubtstartedgettingtome.*Ican'tdothisagain.Ishouldt back, this is crazy. This is batshit crazy, deranged woman-on-the-verge-of-a-nervous-breakdown behavior.*But then, I saw it. The "Happy 40th Birthday" banner hanging in his living room archway, the handful of guests milling about, sippingcocktailsandeatingcheesecubesandlookingliketheforty-somethingcrowdthatthey are-

peoplewithmortgages,withkids,withgoodinsuranceandbookclubsandtipsonhowto keep a ficus alive. And him, in a “birthday boy” hat, holding a Corona and greeting guests.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Icouldn’tturnback.SoIsatandIwatched.Andwatched.AndI’mstillwatching.Whatfor don’t even know. Some masochistic instinct maybe, where I need to hurt to know I’m alive. Or maybe it’s that I want evidence that he’s truly moved on, so that I can too. Or maybe I just want a little entertainment, watching middle-aged middle-class people in their Sunday best clink glasses as they share the highlights of their mundane lives, like that dinner with their in-lawswas canceled or that they got good news about that questionable forearm mole they just hadremoved.

I pluck a potato chip from the bag and pop it in my mouth. I could tell Gwen. Or the whole party even. I could run in and spill all the details of our affair. Ruin a man’s life in a single speech.Thethoughtofitmakesmyadrenalinespike.Isthiswhatpowerfeelslike? Barbedand vicious and belligerent?

ButIwon’tdothat.I’dneverdothat.BecauseIdon’twanttoruinthisman’slife.Iwantto be in it. It’s a truth so opposite of power. So vulnerable. So powerless.

I get to the jagged crumbs at the bottom of the potato chip bag and shake them into my mouth. I crumple up the bag and toss it at the foot of the passenger’s side. I think I see Mr. Korgylookingatme,butwhenIdoadouble-take,he’smid-chuckleatsomeone’sprobably bad-joke.Notevennoticingme.Imust’vebeenimaginingthings.Iturnonmyengineanddriveho

OceanofPDF.com

Another class period with Korgy where I'm ignored. He looks like shit at least - parched lips, puffy eyes, skin that's yellow and gray at the same time - all of which I choose to believe are becauseofme.Becausehecan'teat,can'tsleep,can'tthinkwithoutme.Iclingtothisassome sort of consolation prize. But like any consolation prize, it's just a floppy ribbon reminder that you missed out on the real award, the gold cup trophy you actually wanted, that you'd proudly display on the fireplace mantel, or a shelf, or ironically use as a doorstop to show just how unimportant winning is to you. A convenient thing to show after you've already won.

Afterclass,I'mthefirstoneout.Igrabmythingsfrommylockerandhurrytomycar.Just as I start the engine, there's a hard knock on my window.

"Ineedasecond,"Mr.Korgysays.

Iwanttobestrong,tobecool,tosaysomethingicyandharsh.'Oh,*you*needasecond?'We I needed you. And I didn't get that, so you don't get your second, fucktard.'

But I'm not strong, or cool, or icy, or harsh. I'm needy and wanting and eager, and a small part of me is still even hopeful. So I roll down my window, that small part of me thinking that maybe this is where he professes his love for me. Maybe this is the moment. Right here in the schoolparkinglot.Wouldn'tthatbesomething.Therisk.Thedanger.That'showmuchhelo

"Yes?"Iask,andmytonecomesoutimpressivelyeven.

HescratcheshisbeardandlooksatmelikeI'mtheonewho'ssupposedtostarttalking.

"So what's up?" I ask, nudging him. "I'm running late for work."

Icatcha whiffofhis scentand trytoconvince mybodyit doesn'tlikeit.

OceanofPDF.com

“Ithinkyouknow…”

“Sorry,

I

don’t.”

“Waldo,”hesays,histonepatronizing.“Youhaven’tbeenturninginyourassignments…

“I’ve been busy,” I say, curt and clipped with anger.

“Idon’tcarehowbusyyouare,”hesays.“Youreducationshouldcomefirst.”

Herunshishandsalonghispants,tryingtotemperhisfrustration.IlikethatI’mgettingto him. That I’m still able to affect him.

“Don’tletwhathappenedbetweenusgetinthewayofyou.Istillwantyoutobeabletotake something from my class,” he says.

Asophomorecouplecrossespastthefrontofmycar,handsallovereachother.Mr.Korgy cracks his neck and waits for them to pass.

“It’simportantthatyoukeepwriting.Keepflexingthemuscle.Keepdoingwhatyoulove

Itrynottolaugh.“Idon’tlovewriting.Ilovedyourattention.Icouldn’tgivetwoshitsabou writing. I was using it to get close to you.”

“I understand that you’reupset.”

“I’mnotsayingthatbecauseI’mupset,I’msayingthatbecauseImeanit.”

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “I saw that you loved

it.”

“Yousawwhatyouwantedtosee.JustlikeIdid.”

Ipullmysunglassesoffthesunvisorandputthemon.

“Is there anything else?” I ask.

“Yes.Thereis,”hesays.“Ifyoudon’tstartturninginyourassignments,I*will*failyou.”

Iholdalooktohim.There’ssomethingItasteonmytongue.SomethingIlike.Something bold and cunning and confident. I start to smile.

OceanofPDF.com

“Noyouwon’t,”Isay.

And

then

I

drive

off.

OceanofPDF.com

“We’ve heard so much about you,” Nolan’s father says. He looks exactly like Nolan plus two andahalfdecades.Evenhasthesamefloppymannerisms,theonesthatI’dattributedtoNolan notyetfamiliarizinghimselfwithhisrecentlygrownbodybutguesshe’sjustgotfloppygene

“Somuch,”hismotheragrees,embracingmewithadepthofsincereaffectionthatmakes uncomfortable.Shesmellslikefreshlybakedcookiesandtoomuchroseperfumeandseems the kind of person who refers to anyone younger than her as “dear”.

Hisparentsshowusinsideandgivemeabriefhousetour.They’refullyequippedwithpol small talk and an invisible but palpable air of stability. It’s in their settled eyes, their understanding head nods, their courteous, boundaried phrasing. Now Nolan makes a lot more sense.Peoplewhocomefromfunctioningfamiliesjustdon’thavethesamechargeastherest us. Functioning families make for boring, flavorless people who just go through the motions of life, never knowing what it really means to live it.

Or maybe that’s a false narrative I cling to in order to feel better about my dysfunction, my lot in life, myself. Maybe coming from a functioning family doesn’t resign someone to a bland, muted,watered-downexistence.Maybeit’sbetter.Alotbetter.Maybethatpersonlearnshowto navigate their emotions more effectively, and not be led by them or ruled by them or so disrupted by them all the goddamned time. Upended by them. Maybe that person learns how to communicate better, and how to curb impulsivities, and smile through the bullshit, and fit into systems, and be more okay.

We break out the board games and Mrs. Berry brings out a platter of fruit

and a tray with

cheeseandcrackers.Mr.Berrytellsmeabouthisaccountingfirm,andMrs.Berrytellsmeabo

OceanofPDF.com

teachingsecondgrade,andItellthemwhatIcanaboutmylife,editingouttheunsavorydetails anyaspectthatmightmakeafunctioningfamilywince.“Where’dyougrowup?”“Downtow “What does your mom do?” “She works in retail.” “Are you guys close?” “I would say so.”

We’re half a platter of fruit deep and midway through our third round of Codenames when Nolangivesmealookandglancesupstairs.Thiswillbegoodforme.Thiswillhelpmetomove on. And it’ll be good for him, too. It will help him gain experience, get more comfortable in his skin. This will be good for both of us.

“Think we’d better head up and do some homework before it gets too late,” Nolansays.

HetakesmyhandinhisandItakeonelastlookatNolan’sparentsthroughthestaircase banister. They share a nervous but accepting parental look.

Upstairs, I take Nolan’s quivering virginity under his*Star Wars*bed sheets. Thought seventeenwastoooldforC3-PO.Guessnot.Afterward,he’ssweatyandgrateful,andIfeelbad.

*OceanofPDF.com*

“Areyouhavingfun?”Nolanasks.We’reatapartyathisfriend’sparents’cabinupinBigLak
complete with beer pong and sweaty, grinding teenagers and an Alaskan father whose identity is in conflict, torn between wanting to be a responsible dad and wanting to be a cool one. The kind of guy who sets up a key-check at the front door to ensure that no one drives home drunk…from the booze he supplied the party with.

“Youkidsaregonnabedrinkin’anywaysomightaswelldoitsomewhereIknowyou’re gonna be safe!” he shouts through his bushy mustache, clinking beer bottles with his son.

We’ve been here an hour,

and it feels like three.

“Wecangoifyou’renothavingfun,”Nolansays.

“No,thisisgreat.I’mhavingablast.”Thewordscomeoutsoundingasinauthenticasthey are, and yet, he believes them.

“Good,”hesays.“Justwannamakesureyou’rehavingfun.Tellmeifyouchangeyourmi

I thought it might be nice to be the more wanted one, but it’s uncomfortable. To feel how muchsomeonenotonlywantstobewithyou,buthowbadlytheywantyoutowantthemthe same way. How eager they are to please you, to accommodate you. The unevenness reeks.

Itrytomakethingsfeelmoreevenbetweenusbyrespondingenthusiasticallytohistexts, throwing in cheery smiley face emojis I don’t stand behind, asking him questions from an AI-generated list of date conversation sparkers, but ultimately I know there’s

nothing I can do.

Thattheairofanygivendynamicisimpossibletoovercomewithwordsexchanged,orgestur

OceanofPDF.com

oreffort.Thatwhatadynamicisexistsintheinexplicable.NothingIcouldsayordocould make us even, and so we continue doing this unacknowledged, uneven dance.

"Wecould… goupstairs?"Iask,noddinguptothestringofbedrooms,mostofthemwith shut doors.

"Sure.Yes.Definitely."

Upstairs, we get to it quickly. Our kissing has improved since we've gotten acquainted with each other's noses and mouths and tongues. We've found our hero angles and know how to avoid the clunks and bumps of our bad ones. Our sex has gotten better too. Nolan has learned the value of foreplay and teasing my vagina before jamming his fingers into it. I have learned the value of faking it until I make it. A bit of spit until I'm actually wet, a couple fake moans untilarealonepopsout,andbeforeIknowit,voila,we'refinished.Or,rather,heis,andontwo occasions (including this one) so am I.

"That was amazing," he says, still panting as we lay next to each other inbed.

Amazingisanoverstatementbutgood,yes.Ourbodiesareactuallycompatibleandweca fall into a nice groove when he lets my hips take the lead. And his penis gets very hard. Surprisinglyhard.ThehardestpenisI'vefelt.It'sastark,mannishcontrasttohisboyishbody his rounded shoulders, his gangly limbs, his soft, smooth skin (except for his back, where he could use a 10% benzoyl peroxide wash, but in the heat of things it's not noticeable). I like his body and I like his penis and the technical elements of our sex are all there. So then why am Inot?

"Waldo,"hesays,perchinghimselfuponhiselbow.

Iknowwhathe’sabouttosay.Thewayheslowlytakesinmyfeatures,milkingthemomen
really letting the pause sink in. Randy’s done it and Paul’s done it and now
he’s about to do it.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Let me know how beautiful I am… to him. To him. Always to him. Not realizing that this isn't actuallyacomplimenttome,butawayofshowingthathe'sthejudge,theonewiththeeyestha discern the beautiful from the ugly, the one able to grant beauty where he sees fit. And I'm just the one lucky enough to have been granted it.

"You'resobeautiful,"hesays.

AndIwaitforthe"tome"tocome.Butitdoesn't.Iappreciatethisabouthim,oratleastthat he doesn't say it out loud, but I still see a glint of a "to me" in his eyes and it annoys me.

Reminds me of that scene in*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*when the Jim Carrey character kisses the Kate Winslet character all over in that urgent, rescuing way after she makes someself-consciouscommentabouttherappearance.Hebegstokeepthatonememory.*Justthisone*, he says,*please just let me keep this one*. Of course that's the one he wants to keep, the one where the woman is insecure and he gets to be her savior.

Or maybe I'm making it up, the glint in Nolan's eye. Putting something on him that isn't there.SomethingthatIsecretlywanttobetherebecauseitwouldmakeiteasierformetowrite himoff.Tofeelokayaboutstringinghimalong.Aboutusinganotherpersonfeelinggoodabo me to feel better about myself and my life and my stupid broken heart.

Thereprobably was no glint. Because Nolan is great. Not perfect, but great, which isbetter.

Moretrustable.

There'saknockatthedoorfromthenextsetofteenagers,sowethrowonourclothesandw head downstairs, where Cool Dad smokes from a bong with his kid's friends.

OceanofPDF.com

"Ow!"

"Sorry,zippercaughtya?"Momasks."Achiffonrestraint,that'swhatthisis."

Fourhands,onezipper,andMomandIstillcan'tmanagetosqueezemeintothisdress.Bu paid eighty bucks for it, sale price, and I already popped the tags, so we will find a way.

Momgritsherteethandtugsthezippersohardherhandshakesuntilfinallyitunsticksand zips all the way up. She helps me into my four-inch stilettos and I do a quick mirror check to make sure nothing's ripped, snagged, or broken. Miraculously, no. No evidence of the hero's journey that took place to get me into the thing. Just a girl in a pretty dress. A dress that's completely catered to what Mr. Korgy likes.

Ididgoodatfirst,refrainingfromcheckingthechaperonelist,makingsuretodistractmys by walking out of school with Frannie or Nolan, and I probably could've kept with it if the list wasn't pinned on the bulletin board right near the exit. Or if Nolan hadn't gotten caught up talking with a friend. Or if Frannie hadn't had to pee. But it was and he did and she did. And so three days ago, I caved. I ran my index finger down the list of teachers' names, down down down, until at the very bottom I got to his.*Theodore Korgy*- scribbled in hurried, slanting cursive, as if it was impulsive, as if he tried to convince himself not to do it, but then, like someonetryingnottothinkofapurpleelephant,itsuddenlybecametheonlythinghecouldd So he did it quickly, his heart racing, and when no one was around to see how manic he was while doing it. Just like how I checked it.

Suddenly the shift dress I'd planned on wearing was far from good

enough. I went dress

shoppingthatnightandfoundagownthatwasperfect.Deepteal,thecolorofthesweaterMr.

OceanofPDF.com

Korgycomplimentsthemostbecauseitbringsoutmyeyes.Straplesswithabustierbecauseh
lovesmyboobs-
especiallyintheweekbeforemyperiodwhentheyswellup,butIdon'thave timing
on my side here so the corset will do the heavy-lifting. Sure, it's not
comfortable and sure, the smooshing will lead to sweating which will lead to
a breakout, but I can deal with the revolting fallout later. And silk, because
all men like women to be soft.

My hair is back in a messy ponytail, his favorite hairdo on me, and mostly
out of my face
exceptforafewstrategicallypluckedstrandstoframeit,thestrandsheusedtotwirlaroundhis
finger. My makeup is what Mr. Korgy calls "natural" and I call "a lot" - dabs
of concealer, pumps of foundation, strokes of brow gel, brushes of powdered
bronzer and blush, pats of highlighter. His favorite rose shade of lipstick with
a gloss coating on top, a shimmering champagne eyeshadow, a slick line of
black eyeliner, and a lot of mascara.

It'sallforhim.

There'safaint"shaveandahaircut"knockatthefrontdoor.Momsquealsandopensit.

Nolan stands there, his hair slicked back with gel, an ill-fitting tux rental
hanging like a box on hisbody,thecorsageclippedtohislapelalreadyhalf-
wilted.Heholdsabouquetofrosesouttome.

"Whatasweetheartheis,"Momsays,pointingtohim."Thisisagoodyoungman,Waldo.
very good young man."

"Iknow,"Isay.AndIdo.

"Ooh,Iwannagetapictureofyouguys.Lemmejustgofindmycamerarealquick."

Mom hurries off to grab her Polaroid while Nolan shuffles his

feet.

“Wow,youlookgreat,”hesays.“Butareyousureyou’regonnabecomfortableinthosesh

OceanofPDF.com

"Sorry if my car smells," Nolansays.

Whatdoyoutellsomeonewhenthey'relookingforreassurancethatyoucan'tgenuinely them?

Hiscardoessmell.OfFunyansandvinegarandoldMcDonald'sfriestrappedsomewhere in the purgatory that is a seat cushion crevice.

"It'snotbad,"Isay.

What should be a twelve-minute drive takes nineteen with Nolan in the hot seat, stopping at

everylightthathethinksmightpossiblybeabouttoturnyellowatsomepointinthenearfuture Eventually, finally, thankfully, he pulls into a parking space and he rubs his hands on his pants, steeling himself to make a move that I steel myself to reject.

We were having sex two weeks ago when it happened. He blurted out "I really like you,"

whichiswhatpeoplesaywhentheywanttosay"Iloveyou"butthinkit'stoosoon.Hesaidit with such sincere, needy eyes that I felt sick with guilt.

I tried to negotiate with my body. Convince it to make things easy, to allow itself to succumb to the cheap thrill, allow itself to take advantage of someone.*Who cares?*I said to it.*Who caresif he cares more? You'll break his heart and he'll get over it because he's seventeen. No one's moreresilientthanateenager.Justenjoyagoodfuck.Bepresentandfeelgood.Letyourselff*

But there was no pleasure to be felt. My body turned off. I became a block of flesh with no

soulinsideit.Afuckableghost.Asherailedme,Istaredattheceilingandtriedtorememberif was out of Cocoa Pebbles or needed to pick some up on the way home.

Afterward he asked if

everythingwasalright.SaidIseemeddistantandthathewasuncomfortablehavingsexwithr

like that. I said it wasn’t a big deal, that I was just feeling a bit disconnected.

*OceanofPDF.com*

“WasitbecauseofwhatIsaid?”heasked.“DidImakeitweird?”

Iassured him thatwasn’t it, andthat I wasjust tired, andhe saidalright.

We haven’t had sex since then. He snuggled up pretty close to me a couple nights ago when we were watching*Back to the Future*at his place, and his hand lingered on my thigh, then slippedupmyshirtwhenMartystartedplayingJohnnyBGoode,buthecouldtellIwasn’tinto it, so by the time Marty got to his guitar solo Nolan’s hand slipped back out again.

Respectfulandconsiderateasheis,Icantellit’sstartingtogettohim.Hisglancesare getting a little longer, his puppy eyes a little more pleading. He’s begging to be wanted.
Desperate forit.

“Youlooksopretty,”hesays.Andasheleansovertokissme,Iforcemyselfnottowince.

Weheadtothehotelballroom,andIscanitthefranticwayJasonBournewouldforakiller. seeflashes,justflashes.Ahandonanass.Ahead-tossed-backlaugh.Agirlwhocarestoomuch dancing with her date, who doesn’t care enough, his eyes bloodshot from pot. An overly serious DJ. A few teachers, scattered around and trying to look unassuming. But no Mr. Korgy. All this for him. Stupid sausage casing shoes, dress so tight I can barely breathe, and the hope. So much hope. Nothing hurts as bad as hope being met with reality.

IfeelthesweatyheatofNolan’shandsashemovesthemtowardmyhips.

“I’ve gotta pee,” I yell over the music.

“I’llwaittodancetilyou’reback,”hesays.“Don’t!”

I push open the double doors. Kids makeout in the hallway and sneak sips of liquor from flasks.Ahotelmanagerscoldsanemployee.Iruntothebathroom,dizzy,andshutmyselfinto

OceanofPDF.com

stall,tiltingmyheadbacksothetearsdon’tfall.Igotograbastripoftoiletpaper,buttherollis empty, so I use a toilet seat cover instead.

Fuck this. I’m not gonna be this weak. I can’t be this weak. My chest heaves with a cry but I swallowitdownandheadbacktothedance.Ipushopenthedoubledoorsandscantheballroo again - but this time for the person who does want me. For the person who treats me right. For the floppy, kind-hearted person standing in the corner of the room bobbing his head haphazardly to Post Malone.

IgrabNolan’sface,andkisshim.Someonewhistles.Someonesnaps.Someonelaughs. Nolanlooksshocked.Tousled.Grateful.

WhenItakeastepback,IseeMr.Korgyleaningagainstthewall,armscrossed,lipstight, staring right at me.

*OceanofPDF.com*

“I’msosorry,”hesayswhilehepumpsintome.

Mr. Korgy’s pants are around his ankles and his belt buckle jangles against his shoes with eachpump.Isitonthecounter,mydressbuncheduparoundmywaistandspillingintothesink

“It’sokay,”Isay,pantingintohisface.

“No, it’s not,” he says, between thrusts. “I mean it, I’m so sorry. For everything.” Thrust. “Forpullingaway.Ihatedit.Ifuckinghatedit.”Thrust.“IthoughtIcouldlivewithoutyoubut can’t.” Thrust. “I’m lost without you. A fucking disaster. Can’t sleep, can’t eat, can’t focus.”Thrust.

Theproclamationsofromancearenice,butthesettingleavessomethingtobedesired.Cr tiles, occasional questionable wet spots on the floor, grimey toilet that gushes every twenty seconds from the trigger-happy motion sensor. I guess it’s fitting in a strange way. First winter formal. Now this. There must be something about high school dances. The sex-fueled popmusic. The unbridled hormones. Or maybe I just look good in a dress.

Ipullawayfromhim.Hiseyesareslightlyred,hishairslickedbackwithmousse.Hesmell different than he usually does, like tequila and black licorice.

“You’rethebestpartofmylife,”hesays.“Ineedyou.”

“You can have me,” I say too easily. I've entertained hard-to-get fantasies where he says something like what he just said, maybe in the rain, maybe sans dick inside me, but similar verbiage.InthefantasiesIplayitcoolandcoyandmysterious,givingsomekindof“we’llsee” non-

answer,unspoken,justwithatiltofmychinoracoquettishlookticklingthecornersofmy eyes. But now that he’s here in front of me actually saying the words, those fantasies are

OceanofPDF.com

abandoned.I'mnothardtoget.I'malreadygot.AndI'mokaywithit.Thisisthetruthforme. This is reality.

"Oh,baby,"hesays,pullingmeintohim."Good,baby."

Hekissesmyclavicle.Bitesmyear.Cupsmyface.Devoursme.Ileanbackandthemotion sensor on the sink gets triggered and water starts gushing out of the faucet, pouring onto mydress.

Mr. Korgy lifts me off the sink while I continue riding him. He presses his body into mine andpullsmineintohiswiththerhythmofmyriding,hisbackconcaveasheshoveshimselfas deep in me as he'll go, like we can't be close enough, like he thinks if he presses our bodies together tightly enough we'll become one.

"Waldo,I'vebeenafuckingidiot,"hewhispersintomyhair.

"Then stop being one."

"Okay,"helaughs.

"Okay,"

I

laugh.

Andwebothkeeplaughingthewaypeopledowhenthey'reeagerforsomelevity,thekind of seeking laughter that borders on maniacal.

Andthen,whilewe'restilllaughing,Islowdownmyrhythm,swervingmyhipsthewayh likes. His laugh turns into a moan of agonizing pleasure. I gradually escalate my riding to bouncing - a happy, gleeful, giddy bounce.

HemovestothetoiletandsitsonitwhileIstraddlehim.Themotionsensorgoesoff.The toilet flushes another of its long, over-the-top flushes and he surrenders to me.

OceanofPDF.com

"So… did you have fun?" Nolan asks, driving with his hands prescriptively at ten and two.

"Yeah,Idid,"Isay,thenIcatchhisdisappointment."Andsorry… Ididn'tmeantodisappear onyou."

Nolanpullsuptomyapartment.Ican'tlookathim,butIcanfeelhimlookingatme.

"Well you did," he says. "I was worried about you."

Ihatethatphrase."Iwasworriedaboutyou."Frannieusesitallthetime.Itskirtsaroundthe truth. Rather than own their own feelings, the sense of rejection or disappointment or whatever they experienced in reaction to something I did, they find a way of making themselves bigger and me smaller.*I'm*the one*they*have to worry about because they're the adult and I'm thechild.

"Iwasfine,"Isay,unbucklingmyseatbeltandpushingmydooropen,eagertogetoutofthi conversation as quickly as possible. "You don't need to worry about me."

"Hey,"Nolansays,stoppingme."Ithinkweneedtostopseeingeachother."

I pull my door shut again and turn to face him. "You do?"

It'snotthatIdon'tagreewithhisdecisiontobreakupwithme.It'sjustthatI'msurprised.I thought he liked me so much. I thought he was the chaser. And I thought the chaser always keeps chasing. But maybe they don't. Maybe only chasers with low self-esteem keep chasing.

"Huh. Okay then," I say, and the sting in my eyes takes me off guard. I'm not sure why it's there.Ifit'sjustthatrejectionhurtsnomatterwhoit'scomingfrom,orifit'sspecifictoNolan.

really did think he was kind and good. I really did want to want him. And I really don’t want to lose him.

*OceanofPDF.com*

“Yeah,”hesays,pickingunderhisfingernails.“Itoldmyselfifthingsdidn’tturnaroundb
prom, I’d end it.”

“Whydidn’tyoutellme?”

“Feltlikeanultimatumtome.I’mnotinterestedinthatsortofthing.Idon’twantsomeone
choose me because they’re scared of losing me. It’s not the same as choosing someone because you like them. It’s kind of the opposite actually… Look, I really like you, you know? And atfirst I thought you were shy. Or hurt from somebody else. Closed off. I figured you’d take some time to get to know. To drop your walls. But then I realized it’s just not happening. Because you don’t want you walls to drop for me. And I don’t know why. And I tried guessing for a while.

But I don’t want to anymore. I realized I don’t need to know why. I’m a good guy, you know?

AndIdon’twannawastemytimeandenergyonsomeonewhodoesn’tcareaboutmethesame
way I care about them. Simple as that.”

“That… makes a lottasense.”

Iaskifhewantstostayfriends,aquestionI’veneveraskedsomeoneduringabreakup,and
he says that he doesn’t think that would be a good idea for him. He doesn’t think it would be healthy. So I say okay and as I leave, the car door scrapes against the curb. I apologize, and he says it’s just a door.

Icutacrossthelawneventhoughthesprinklersaregoing,heelsslungovermyshoulderas
twist the straps between my fingers. I hear Nolan’s car pull away and I turn back to wave him goodbye, but he’s already halfway down the street.

OceanofPDF.com

We'rebackatBelugaPointthedayafterpromwhenhetellsmehelovesme.It'swarmerthanit was last time, and the sky's prettier, and the snow's melted.

"Hey,"hesays,turningmyfacetowardhim.

"Iloveyou,"hesaysagain.ThesearethewordsI'vewantedtohear,wordsthatI'vecraved Andnowhe'stellingthemtomeandIcan'tevenlookathim."I'velovedyouthewholetime.I just felt too guilty to say it. Afraid that loving you made me a bad guy."

"You'renotabadguy…"Isay.

"On paper, yes, I am. On paper, I'm the worst kind of guy. And I didn't want to face that. To acceptit.But I'verealizedI'dratherbehonestaboutbeingabadguythandishonestaboutbein a good one."

"What's'onpaper'isjustcold,hardfactswithnocontext.Nonuance.Nosubtlety,"Isay.' don't know if what's 'on paper' matters."

He picks up a twig and tosses it toward the water. "Look, I'm not saying all this for you to defend me or reassure me. I'm saying it to own my actions. I've been lying long enough, it's timeIatleaststoplyingtomyself.Andyou.AndthatstartswithmetellingyouthatIloveyou."

Hepullsmeinforahug,andIshutmyeyes,andIbreathehimin.Pineandmuskandthe faintest whiff of B.O.

"Iloveyou,too,Mr.Korgy."

OceanofPDF.com

Mytasseldanglesinmyface,repeatedlybumpingmynose.I'mtwosecondsawayfromrippi
the damn thing off when my name is called. I step forward, crossing the pop-up stage in the center of this football field. I reach for my diploma with one hand, extending my other to shake hands with Principal Sanders. His tired, uninvested eyes betray his huge false smile. What a strange performance, graduation. Same as any other life milestone - an engagement, or a wedding, or a baby shower, or a funeral. All of life's defining moments, reduced to ceremonialperformances.

But graduation might be the strangest. The Professor McGonagell dress robes. Theominously formal handshakes from adults, as if they're welcoming you to the tribe, or warning youaboutit.Theuglyitalicizedfontontheplaqueyou'llneverlookatagainuntilsomedayyo kid stumbles on it up in the attic and realizes they spelled your name wrong. The disgruntled younger siblings stuffed in the bleachers between moms who elbow them to pay attention and dads who record on their iPhones like it's their life's work. The forced goodbyes, fake "I'll miss yous" and empty "Let's keep in touch's." The lofty commencement speech by a 12th grader you're supposed to pretend has wisdom even though she's spewing quotes I've seen ondoormats at HomeGoods.

Mid-handshake, we both twist our bodies outward to the audience so the official photographercansnapourphoto.IhearMomshoutfromthenosebleedsthatIfuckingrockar that I'm her girl. I see Mr. Korgy, sandwiched between other teachers, wearing his fancy purple cardigan and clapping big. He smiles at me, and my face lights up. The camera flashes.

OceanofPDF.com

“Sorryourcelebrationisabitbelated,”Mr.Korgysays,reachinghisglassouttoclinkmine.

“It’s fine, I’m glad it worked out,” I say, reaching mine out to clink his.

And we clink and we sip and we smile and I pretend that I don’t have deja vu. Sure, there’s thedistinctionofcelebratingmygraduation,buttherestoftheoutingfeelsoddlyreminiscent thewaythingswerebefore-waitingfivedaysforhimtohaveapocketoftimelongenoughthat he could drive to a town far enough so we could go to a restaurant obscure enough that we wouldn't run the risk of anyone recognizing him.

Isn’t“Iloveyou”supposedtomeansomething? Itookitasanewdevelopmentandexpected it to lead to a tangible shift in our dynamic. What kind of shift, I don’t know. But something. I assumed that by admitting he loved me, he was committing to me in some new way. I assumed love translated to me having more access to him. To some new level our intimacy could reach. Or at least a few more hours together here and there. But it’s clear now that I read into it. He never said he’d have more time for me. Or that he’d try harder to make some for me. Or that he’d commit to me in any kind of new, more meaningful way. He just said that he loved me. Maybeitwasjustsomethingheneededtogetoffhischest.

“Well thanks for being so

understanding,” he says.

The life drains from my eyes and a prickly sensation trickles down my spine. Last time he said this, I doubted him. Doubted that he was actually

complimenting me and not just

conditioningme,tryingtoreinforceabehaviorthatmadehislifeeasier.Thistime,I’msureof

*OceanofPDF.com*

By June, things with Korgy have settled back into a groove. Rushed visits on my lunch break at work or while Gwen's on a playdate with Gregory, or picking him up from daycare, or getting brunch with a friend. Ducking down at stoplights. Hurried text exchanges that end abruptly and withnonoticewheneverhe'ssummonedbacktohisregularlife.Occasionalout-of-towndinners when he's able to come up with a good enough excuse and when enough time has passed from thelastonethatitwouldn'tbesuspicious.Dinnerswherehe'lltellmetoorderwhateverI'dlik asifapieceofsalmoncancureabrokenheart.Maybeitcan.I'veheardOmega-3'shavealotof benefits, maybe this is one of them.

I don't order whatever I'd like, but I do order the second most expensive thing on the menu, usuallyawhitefish.Thefirst,usuallyaprimerib,wouldbetooobvious.ThatI'mresentfulan trying to take it out on him by forcing him to drain his teacher-salary pockets on a piece of protein I'll shit out by morning. But the second most expensive item, that's discreet.

"Youokay?"he'llask,reachingacrossthetabletocaressthetopofmyhand.

"I'mfine,"I'llsay,inatonesofake-polite-pick-megirlthatitmakesmewanttoripmy throat out of my body.

AndyetIcan'thelpmyself.BecauselasttimeIbroke,lasttimeIcriedandcomplained,Ilo him. I will not let that happen again. So I shove my concerns down. And my disappointments.

And my grievances. And everything else that isn't my perky tits and my warm, wet vagina. Those are his. But everything else, everything that's

unappealing to him, that's too needy and tooemotionalandtoosensitiveandtoomuch,everythingthatmightleadtoanotherbreakup, keep to myself and I scream it into a pillow later.

*OceanofPDF.com*

I never ask him to stay even a minute longer than he says he can. I let him take phone calls fromGwenwithoutsayingaword,sometimesIevenremindhimtocallher."It'sbeenawhile you oughta give her a ring." I hold him when he's tired, I 'there, there' him when he's sad, I reassurehimhislimitedtimeslotswithmearemorethanenough,thatwe'llmakeitwork,asat

"Areyousureyou'reokay?"he'llask,hisvoicelilting.

"Yes, I'm sure," I'll say.

Andthentheentreeswillcomeandsowill Mr. Korgy'ssecondglassofwineandmysecon glass of Coke and we'll eat our food and drink our drinks and laugh just like we would if we didn't have this palpable tension growing between us. If my resentments weren't stacking up andmyragewasn'tswelling.It'salmostfunny,hownomatterhowmuchyou'restartingtoha someone, you can sit across from them and laugh while you have a nice dinner.

Sometimes we'll get handsy in the car, sometimes we'll wait until we get to my place and do it there quickly. The intercourse has started to take on a blacker hue, for me at least, force underscoringeachsuckandhumpandlickandswallow.*That'salright*,Itellmyselfastheang beads of sweat roll off my body,*anger is the truest form of passion*.

"You'resosexy,"he'llsay,stickinghisfingerinmymouth.Ihavetoconvincemyselfnot bite it off, but I do. I convince myself every time.

"Yeah?"I'llwhineinhot-porn-girlvoice,wantingtospitinhisfacesoinsteadlettinghim cum on mine.

Sometimes my sadness tries to cut in line but I tamp it down, biting my tears back as I beg

himtofuckmeharderandharderandharder,secretlyhopingthatifhefucksmehardenough, he'll fuck the resentment right out of me. He never does.

*OceanofPDF.com*

I tug my tampon out of me and wrap it in some tissues before stuffing it in my glove compartment, then wipe myself down with a half-dry tropical scented Wet One from the pack I've had crammed in my center console for years and shove the wipe in the glove compartmen too. Glove compartments are scary places.

He lets me in through the back door. Tells me I look amazing and that we don't have long, in that order. Always in that order. First the compliment, then the disappointment.

I look down at my outfit, the plaid mini skirt and collared crop top that I plucked from the bin in the back of my car. "The Bin" is a strategy I started three weeks back when Mr. Korgy texted me on short notice to hang out and I was at the grocery store, in schleppy sweats with prickly legs and a greasy bun of hair that was long overdue for a wash. By the time I went home and changed, I'd missed my window. I vowed to never again be unprepared, to never again miss an opportunity to spend time with him, so I started The Bin, a plastic bin in my trunk that I keep stocked with makeup essentials and a collection of Mr. Korgy's favorite clothes on me - tight jeans and short skirts and snug-fitting tops.

Today was The Bin's day to shine. I got Korgy's text twenty minutes ago, ducked out of wo with a quick excuse, then cleaned myself up and changed into the version of me he likes best, a courtesy of The Bin. Voila.

"I'm on my period," I warn him. I probably should have warned him when he first texted bu I was afraid it might make him cancel. I didn't want to risk it.

"I don't care," he says, and relief floods me. "I want your blood on me."

OceanofPDF.com

Hepullsmeinclosebymyasschecksandleansagainstthemudroomwall,grindingagain
“Baby,thatass,”hesays.

“Youlikeit?”Iask,turningaroundandwaggingitonhim.

“Fuuuuck,” he says, moaning as I feel him

grow.

We rush upstairs to the bedroom. Korgy shuts the door and kicks off his pants and boxers. I tughisbarecockupbetweenmylegssohecanfeelmyheat.Hereachesdowntoteasemewith his middle finger, then brings it to his mouth, covered in blood, and licks it up one side and down the other. It turns me on more.

He crouches down onto his knees and starts licking me. I lift my skirt to look at him. He smiles,bloodsmearedonhislipsandcheekslikehe’shavingthebestmealofhislife.Hestand up, penis bobbing toward me, rests his hand on the small of my back, and impales me like it’s nothing. And I wrap my legs around him like it’s everything.

Iripoffmyshirtandbounceonhiscockwhilehegrabssometowelsandspreadsthemouto the bed. He lifts me off of him, sets me on top of the towels, and slaps my tits with his bloodieddick.

“Slapmyfacewithit,”Isay.“What?”

“Slap my face with your bloodydick.”

And so he does. It makes a smacking sound when it meets my cheek and I feel the blood splatter onto my eyelids and forehead. He shoves himself into me again and I moan his name whileIbounceonhim,showinghimjusthowbadlyIwanthim.SexistheoneplaceIcan.The one place it’s okay. The one place where my needs aren’t too big and all of

my yearning is

OceanofPDF.com

acceptable.TheoneplacewhereIcanshowhowdeepthewelliswithinme.Thevoid.Theone place I can beg and whine and scream to have it be filled.

"Hello?!"

Korgypullsoutofme.Hisdickflailswildlythroughtheair,coagulatedclumpsofblood flying off of it.

"Hello?!" Gwenyth's

voice calls out again.

"Shit,"Korgysays,lookingatme,panic-

stricken. "Shit," I say

back, equally panic-

stricken. "Babe?!"

Gwenyth calls out.

Korgyrunsintotherestroom,wetsahandtowel,andscrubsthebloodoffhisbloodiedpart He chucks the hand towel on top of the bed towels and scoops them all up in one quickmotion.

"The closet. Get in the closet," he tellsme.

Korgy dumps the towels into the corner of the closet and I tuck into the other corner and crouchdown,huddlingovermykneesasfootstepsmaketheirwayupthestaircase.Itrytuggi the sliding door shut but it's on the wrong track, so I push that door away from me and grab anotherone,whichisstillwrong,andthenre-pushandre-pulluntilIgetthishome-cookedslide puzzle challenge right, all those seasons of Survivor culminating in this one moment.

"Teddy!"Gwenythshouts.

IpeerthroughacrackintheclosetdoorsasKorgythrowsonhisclothes,grabshisiPadfron the nightstand, and shoves his earbuds in.

“Myskirt!”Iwhisper-shout,spottingitontheothersideofthebed.Korgykicksitunderthe bed then leaps onto it just as Gwenyth swings open the bedroom door.

*OceanofPDF.com*

"Oh.Hi, babe," Korgysays, pretending tobe startled, eventaking an earbudout to sellit.

atalentedliar.

"Did you not hear me? I was literally screaming foryou."

"No,Ididn'thear,sorry,"hesays,takingouttheotherone."HadmusiconwhileIwas catching up on some reading."

"I wasscreaming."

"Sorry,Ididn'thear.Everythingokay?"

"Bethany'sdogjustgotsick.Wishshewould'veatleastcalledmebeforeIdroveallthewa over there."

"Right,right."

"Are you okay?" Gwenasks.

"Yeah,fine,"Korgysaystooquicklyandwithajumpinessthatwouldgiveanywoman pause. Gwenyth crosses her arms and studies him.

"Ohhh, I see…" she says, a realization dawning onher.

"What?"Korgyasksinnocently,thencatchesuptoher."Oh,youthinkIwas…? Iwasn't–I honestly wasn't."

The pulse of an oncoming gush of blood swooshes through my uterus, then through my cervix. I cup my hand underneath as the blood oozes out, gelatinous clumps and mucousy, goopystringsofit.Itrytocontaintheslimyflowinmyhandbutitslidesthroughmyfingertips and onto the carpet underneath me.

"It'sokay,"Gwensays,unbuttoninghertopassheinchesclosertothebed."Turnitbacko Wecanwatchtogether."

“Baby,I’m–
I’mreallybeat.”

OceanofPDF.com

“Too beat for this?” she asks, snapping her bra strap. She kicks off her ballet flats and crawls ontothebedinherbraandjeans,backarchedasshekissesherwayupthelengthofMr.Korgy’s jeans and moves her hands to his thighs. Another chunk of blood pulses out of my vagina and dumps into my hand as I watch the man I love be seduced by his wife.

“Baby,please.Mymind’sjustinworkrightnow,”hesays.Hurtflashesinhereyesandfora moment I feel like I’ve won. Until the sleeve of a wool turtleneck brushes my cheek and I remember I’m the one cupping my own period blood in*her*closet.

“Alright,”Gwensighs,kickingoffherjeanstoproveapoint.“I’mgonnashower.Pleasef

“Yougotit.”

“Loveyou,”shesays,attemptingtothrowitoverhershoulder,butthere’salingeringinhe eyes that betrays her efforts. An unmistakable question mark that asks,*do you love me too?*

“Love you too,” Mr. Korgy says unceremoniously, the way anyone says anything they’ve saidamilliontimesbefore.Gwenbitesherlip,dissatisfied,andshutsthebathroomdoorsoftl behind her. The shower faucet creaks on. The water pressure sounds good even from here.
Korgylooksoverto me,clutchinghischest.

*Whew,*hiseyessay.

IlookdownatthemessImade,thered,clumpypuddleonthecarpetunderneathme.“Ibled on your carpet.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

“Ican’tdothisanymore,”Isay.Mytoneisflat,myeyesglazedoverwithaneeriedistance. Inside I’m still. There’s no urgency, no ache, no chaos.

“Whatareyoutalkingabout?”heasks,ahintofasmileinhiseyes.He’smoreamusedthan hurt, which is telling. He thinks I don’t mean it. That I’m just a little girl with a skinned knee and he can kiss it better.

I used to be that girl but I’m not anymore. She seems to have disappeared overnight, kidnapped from her bed. I woke up this morning from the light coming in through the curtains, and even though the sun was right in my eyes, I didn’t squint. I showered, changed, and put on my makeup with a robotic evenness. I drove to work, listening to nothing. As I pulled into a parkingspace,thethoughtenteredmymind.TodayisthedayIbreakupwithhim.Therewasn charge underneath it. No fear. No vengeance. No drama. No emotion at all. It was plain. It was simple. It was what I was going to do.

“Baby? What do you mean?” he asks, a nervous tickle in his throat like he’s starting to believeit.Hesetshisteadownonthecoffeetable,notbotheringwithacoaster.Idon’tmind. Our table was seventeen bucks from Goodwill. It is ugly.

“Thisisnotworkingformeanymore,”Isay,thewordscomingoutroteandstaccato.“Ican keep doing this.”

“But… things have been going well… I mean, I always wish we had more time, ofcourse.

Did you sleep okay last night? Are youtired?”

Momusedtosaythattome.WhenIwasakid,sixorseven,ifI’dchuckatoyatthewalland scream that I wanted attention. Or if I’d hide in the corner of the bathroom in

the hopes she'd

OceanofPDF.com

comelookingformebecauseshemissedmebutthenI'dwatchtheclocktickby-tenminutes, then twenty, then thirty - and she'd never come looking for me. I'd come out of the bathroomcrying.

"Youdidn'tevenknowIwasgone,"I'dsay.

"Aww,areyoutired?"she'dask.AndIhatedherforit.Iwasn'ttired.Iwasalotofthings, but I wasn't tired.

"I'mnottired,"Isaytohim."I'mresentful.Or,Iwasresentful.ButI'mnotanymore.Itwe away. Now I'm just… nothing. I'm clear."

"Butyouhaven'tcommunicatedanyofthat.Youhavetotellsomeonewhenyou'reupset when you resent something they're doing so they have an opportunity to fix things."

"You saw that I was hurting," I say plainly. "I know you did. But you pretended like you couldn'tbecausethatwouldhavemadeyourlifemoredifficult.Youwould'vefeltmoreguil And more burdened. And more scared. And instead of just placating me or reassuring me, you would've had to actually do something about it. Something that I know now you'll never do."

As the reality of the situation finally sets in, the begging begins. The repeated no's and please's and I love you's, the promises of a better tomorrow. He rattles off the mistakes he's madeandhowheplanstomakeamends,andallthegreatideashehasforwayshecanbebetter to me, ideas that I don't hear because the words sound muffled and underwater. The way words do when you stop believing them.

"I'mgonnatalktoalawyer,"hesays,hisjawsettingwithconfidence,asifhe'ssurethiswi do the trick. "I've been thinking about it for a while. I didn't want to say anything until I knew exactly how and when I'd do it, but fuck it. I'm gonna

talk to a lawyer about leaving my

OceanofPDF.com

marriage.Iwanttobewithyou.Ihavetobewithyou.AndIcan.Wecan.Wecandoitnow. You're graduated now, I'm not your teacher."

"We both know you're not leaving your wife and kid for an eighteen-year-old," I say, my voice distant and measured. "Let's be realistic, alright? This was an escape for both of us. An escapefromtheshittynessofourregularlives.AndI'lladmit,Ilovedthechase.WhenIthoug therewasachanceIcouldwinit.ButnowIknowIcan't.I'mpursuingsomethingthatI'llneve have. Kinda takes the fun out of the chase. So let's just shake hands and accept that it's time to move on."

He cocks his head and his eyebrows bend in, like he's confused. Like he doesn't recognize me. I'm sure he doesn't. I don't either. I stare at him, unblinking and blank. His puzzled expression caves in on itself and, as it collapses, the tears start to fall. I reach out my hand to shake his, but he doesn't take my hand. Instead he collapses into me, crying about how determinedheistomakethiswork,andhowhewon'tbeabletohandleitbeingover,andhow much he needs me, and how much he loves me. And still, I feel nothing.

*OceanofPDF.com*

**Sunday**

Mr.Korgy,9:59p:Wecanfigurethisout.We’regoodtogether.

Mr.Korgy,10:46p:Pleasegivemeachancetomakethisright.

Mr. Korgy, 11:02p: Baby?

Mr.Korgy,11:04p:Pleasejusttalktome.

Mr. Korgy,

11:05p: Please?

Missedcall-Mr.Korgy(4)

**Monday**

VOICEMAIL #1 - “Hey lady, it’s me. Sorry about all those messages last night. Was getting prettyworkedup.Uhh,I’dlovetomeetup,ifyou’reupforitofcourse… Ihopeyouare.Iwas caught pretty off guard but I really want to talk this out with you now that I’ve had a chance to think. Call me back. Okay. Bye.”

Mr.Korgy,1:52pm:Justwanttomakesureyou’reok?

Wouldlovetotalkthisalloutwithyouif you’re open to it.

Waldo,2:48pm:wealreadytalked.

OceanofPDF.com

Mr.Korgy,2:49pm:Right!

Right.Yeswedid.ButIthinkthere'salotmoretosay.There's certainly a lot more I want to tell you from my end, if you're open to hearing it…

Mr.Korgy,3:03pm:I'mhereifyouwanttotalkmore.Icanmaketimewhenever.

Mr. Korgy, 5:55pm: Just thinking of you.

Mr.Korgy,7:38pm:Stillthinkingofyou.

Mr.Korgy,10:10pm:Goodnight,beautifulgirl.

**Tuesday**

Mr.Korgy,8:01am:Goodmorning!

Hopeyougotagoodnight'ssleep.Canwemeetupforcoffee?

Mr.Korgy,8:13am:Icouldspendthewholedaywithyoureally,ifyouwant.Icanfindaway.

VOICEMAIL #2 - "Hey beautiful, I'm in your neck of the woods actually. Just figured I'd get someerrandsdonearoundherewhileIwaittohearbackfromyou.I'dlovetomeetupwithyou so we can talk. I can pick you up? Or you can meet me somewhere. Wherever you want. Okay. Talk soon. I hope. Bye."

VOICEMAIL#3-"Heylady,I'mjustkindabobbingaroundtownuntilIhearfromyou.Gimm a call when you get a chance. I could stop by the mall if you're working? We could talk on your lunchbreakorsomething? Letmeknow.Woop,justsawafamilyofdeeronthesideoftheroad. Pretty cute. Anyway, talk to you later. Bye."

OceanofPDF.com

Mr.Korgy,6:58pm:Justwanttomakesureyou'regettingthese?

Icalledyouacoupletimestoo but know voicemails can take a minute to show up…

Mr.Korgy,8:06pm:OkayIcantellyou'reangry.Butjusttalktomeaboutit,okay?

There'sno need to use the silent treatment. We can talk about this like adults.

Mr.Korgy,9:00pm:Areyouthere?

Mr.Korgy,9:16pm:Whatever.Fine.Dowhatyouwant.AllI'mtryingtodoistalkthisoutlike an adult.

Mr.Korgy,10:02pm:I'mjustscared.You'reneverlikethis.Youalwayshavesomethingtos I'm worried.

Mr.Korgy,11:11pm:Okaygoodnight.Ihopeyoufindsomeclarityonwhateveritisyou're looking for.

**Wednesday**

VOICEMAIL #4: "Hey baby. I'm… embarrassed. I've never, um, I don't know, I'm… I've never left a voicemail like this. I'm just… shaky. Jittery. My hands are literally trembling. Like I'vehad12cupsof coffee.Ican'tsleep.I can'teatanything.I'ma wreck.Pleasecallmeback."

VOICEMAIL #5: "Waldo, please talk to me. I'm dying to hear from you. Please don't keep doingthistome.I'm… IknowIsounddesperate.Iamdesperate.Ineedtotalktoyou.Please. We can work this out."

*OceanofPDF.com*

Mr.Korgy,4:41pm:Iwasalreadysureofitbutthesepastfewdayshaveprovenittomeeven more. That I need to end things with Gwenyth to be with you. Because my God I can't live without you. I need you.

Mr.Korgy,4:57pm:(LinktoYouTubevideoof"INeedYou"ByLeAnnRimes) 😂

Mr.Korgy,4:59pm:(Thatwassupposedtomakeyoulaugh,butalsoImeanit…)

Mr.Korgy,7:12pm:Okaybutseriouslybaby,Igetthatyoudon'twanttotalk,andthat'sokay. Let me just say some things that I need to say to you. Things that you deserve to know.

Mr.Korgy,10:08pm:Igotmarriedoutofasenseofobligation.Itnevershouldhavehappened the first place. That's not a good reason to get married. To do anything. Obligation. For the longest time, I told myself I'd propose to Gwen after my career got going, after life made more sense, whatever excuse I could use to drag my feet just a little bit longer. But then I saw how much it was hurting her, the waiting. She kept asking to get married, begging, saying how much sheneededit,tofeelsaferandbetterandhappier,andIfigured,we'vebeentogetherforsolong shesupportedmeforseveralyears,sheletmepursuemyloftycreativeambitions.Ioweittohe to give her this one thing. I ignored that snag of doubt in my gut, the snag that knew we really weren't a perfect match, that I couldn't communicate with her the way I dreamed of communicating with a significant other, that there was some discrepancy between she and I, that shetookinlifeadifferentwaythanIdid.IignoredallofthatandIthrewmylifesavingsintoan engagement ring, and her parents threw us a wedding with a fancy cake and overpriced floral arrangements and wedding food that tasted like airplane food. And we said our vows and smeared cake in each other's faces and that night, my head hit the pillow and I felt proud, for being a good guy. I thought, 'I did the right thing. For her. She'll be happier now.' But then she wasn't.

She was no happier. In fact, she seemed more miserable, maybe because she was slowly

OceanofPDF.com

realizing the thing that she thought would make her happier, the thing she'd been pinning all her happiness on, actually made no difference after all. And so her misery became my misery. And yet neither of us said anything. Just kept taking smiley pictures for her to post on Instagram with happy captions about her 'darling hubby'. Meanwhile, behind closed doors, our dinner conversationsgotquieterandquieter.Thenonenightafterworkshesaidshewantedtotalkw me, and I thought, 'This is it. This is the divorce talk.' And a part of me, as ashamed as I am to admitit,feltatinysparkofhope.Butinsteadshetellsmeshewantsababy.Needsone.Shewas convinced and adamant, and her eyes lit up in a way they hadn't in months. I never wanted kids, sheknewthat,butIstartedtofeellikeIhadtogiveherone.Outofobligation.SoIdid.Andthis timeitdidwork.Sheactuallygothappier.ButIdidn't.Iadorethelittleguy,morethananythin but he didn't save our marriage. Just distracted us from it. And that was enough for Gwen. So I tried to convince myself that it was enough for me, too. 'Who's that happy, anyway?' I'd ask myself.'Isanyone? Maybelifeisn'tabouthappiness,maybeit'saboutresponsibility.Something you endure, for the sake of your family.' So that's the philosophy I threw myself into, like if I could just fill all my time performing my dad duties and my husband duties, I'd have no timeleft to even consider myself let alone my discontent, let alone do anything about that discontent. So I changed diapers, and did daycare drop offs, and washed binkies, and hung out with Gwen's terrible friends, and took her shopping at LuLuLemon so she could pick out workout leggingsfor her Saturday morning yoga class that I'd drop her off at and pick her up from and listen to her complain about on the drive home while Gregory threw cheerios in the backseat and cried

thattherewasnonewepisodeofWonderoosonhisiPad.AndIsatthereenduringallofitwitha smile slapped on my face, why? Because I felt obligated. Then you entered the picture and I woke up. For the first time in years, I woke up. Because I wanted something. I didn't feel

OceanofPDF.com

obligated to something. I wanted something. You. I just. Wanted. You. And I still do. And I'm realizing, I've lived my past decade out of this place of obligation. And I almost died insidefromit.AndIcan'tdoitanymore.TheonlypersonI'mobligatedtoismyself.Ioweittor to live my life for myself. I'll be a better ex-husband than a husband, to not quietly be teeming with indignation. And yes, it will be complicated, but ultimately I will be a better father to Gregory, more present, more lighthearted. I can be better for them if I do this for me. I won't be going through the motions and gritting my teeth while Gwen asks which indistinguishably similar pair of jeans goes better with her sweater. I need to do this. For me. I owe it to myself to be with you. I'm leaving Gwen tomorrow.

Waldo,11:05pm:lolyou'renotgonnaleaveyourfamilyforme

Mr. Korgy, 11:06pm: Watch me.

**Thursday**

Mr.Korgy,7:38am:Justwokeup.Feelingstrong.I'mgonnadoittonight,Waldo.I'mgonna end my marriage, but I need to know you're still in this with me. Are we doing this?

Mr.Korgy,10:22am:Ifyou'rein,I'llbookusaroomattheCaptainCookHotelfortonight.Yo can meet me there at 9:30pm. I'll put your name on the reservation too so you can check in if you get there first 😊

Waldo,10:28am:(...)

Waldo,10:33am:(stopstyping)

Mr.Korgy,10:41am:Baby,Iseeyoutyping.Areyouhere?

Mr. Korgy, 10:45am: Where’d you go?

*OceanofPDF.com*

Mr.Korgy,10:58am:Areyouhere?

Waldo,10:59am:seeuatthecaptaincook,9:30pm.9:31pm,I’mgone.

*OceanofPDF.com*

IthoughtIwasoverMr.Korgy,andyet,hereIam,lyingonthefluffycomforterinthisCaptain Cook top-floor hotel room, wearing a slinky red lingerie slip and waiting for his arrival.

Itwasn'tlikethisatfirst.Thebreakupwasreal.Notatactic.Notaploy.Ireallymeantit.Fel numb and disconnected. Then he started to clamor, and grovel, and scramble, and the iciness from the breakup began to thaw, making way for a brand new, bright and shiny feeling. Power.

Youngpower,justasprout,thekindthathasagiddinesstoit.Atickledsenseofamusement.I' thumb through his strings of frantic texts on my breaks at work, or play his stuttery voicemails

whileIforkedaTVdinnerintomymouth,andI'dsmirkattheirony.Allittookforhimtowant to be with me was me no longer wanting to be with him.

But the power didn't last long. I almost wish it had. That I'd been strong enough, cool

enoughtochoosepoweroverhim.ButI'mnot.Icaretoomuchabouthim,ornotenoughabout myself,orboth.Idon'thavethedignity,thepride,theguts,towalkaway.SoinsteadIlayhere, powerless again, back in the cycle, praying he doesn't disappoint me.

And this time, he doesn't. I hear the beep-beep of his keycard at 9:30 on the dot. The door

swingsopenandKorgystandsinthemiddleofthedoorway,backlit,grayringsunderhiseyes gaunt skin, ten pounds lighter in less than a week. Even his hair looks tired.

"Ididit,"hesays,stunned."It'sover."

He lets the door shut behind him. And then it all comes pouring out like soda out of a shaken

can,tearsandsnotandsweatflyingoutofhim,leakingdownhischeeksandontohisshirtashis chest convulses in violent contractions.

“Hey,hey,hey,”Isay,pullinghimintoahug.

*OceanofPDF.com*

“She was so confused,” he hiccups. She just kept saying ‘I don’t understand, I don’t understand.’”Hiccup.“Isaidthiswouldbebetterforbothofusandfor Gregorytoo.AndI know it will be. I know it will be. But it’s still the hardest thing I’ve ever done.”

He sobs into me and onto me and all over me. His whole body shudders and jerks with the traumaofwhathejustwentthrough.Ipathimonthebackwhilehisbodilyfluidspourallover my lingerie until, finally, he grows quiet, and he falls asleep.

*OceanofPDF.com*

IwakeupenvelopedbyKorgy'shairyarms,hisbellyheavingagainstthesmallofmybackas hesnoresinlong,rhythmicstrands.Ifeelhishotbreathonmyneckandshutmyeyestosavorit.

I waited so long for this. And now here we are. Together. Really together. No more time constraintsorguilt-riddenrendezvouses.Justaregularcouple,abletofallasleepineachother's arms the way regular couples do.

Ifeelsomethingwetonmyneckandpressmyfingertoit,thenbringmyfingertomymouth andlickKorgy'stangydrool.It'snotassweetasIexpected.Kindofrancid.Kindofgross.Just like I wanted. All the parts of him. Even the gross ones.

I turn around to face him. To take him in, up close and unhurried. The fine lines and faint wrinkles.Theenlargedpores,thetiredeyes.Iseetheweightofhim.Icanfeelhowmuchlife he's lived. It's humanizing and, for some reason, it makes me sad.

I brush his sweaty hair behind his ear and wipe the rest of his drool with the sheet. He keeps snoringandIkeepwatchinghim.Mr.Korgy.TheoneI'vewantedforsolong.Andnow,finall I have him.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Mr.Korgywakesuparoundelevenbythesoundofhisownsnoring.Hejoltsawake,asif someone just barged into the hotel room.

"Whatwasthat?"heasks.

"Your

own

snore,"

I

say.

Andhelaughs.Hewipesthecrustfromhiseyeandglancesattheclock."Whoa,wesleptin

"Yeah,wedid."

Heapologizesforbeingsucha messlastnight,andItell himit'salright.ThatIunderstand.

Thatit'sbeenalot.Thatit'sbeenhard.

"Still,"hesays,shakinghishead,thenhekissesmyneckgentlyandpullsmyhairbehindm shoulders and tells me he can't believe this is actually, finally happening, and I agree.

There'ssomuchIwanttotalkabout,somuchweneedtounpack,butitallfeelstooweighty forelevenam.Soinsteadwesharehowweeachslept-

him,betterthanheexpected,me,decent enough - then we move onto discussing the weather. "It looks pretty cool out." "59." Then we discusswhatwewantfromroomservice.Andthenweorderroomservice.Andthenwediscu how excited we are for room service to arrive.

"Thoseoatmealpancakessoundedprettygood."

"So did your Denver

omelette.”

“Didyougethomestylepotatoes?”

“No,

toast. Did

you get

potatoes?”

“I did.

Wanna

split

both?”

OceanofPDF.com

“Yes.”

The food arrives and we eat, then I sit in Korgy’s lap and initiate a bit of frottage until we’re both worked up enough that we undress and head to the bed. As I sop up his cum with a towel, he blushes and asks if I can put in my earbuds while I presume he takes his morning shit, but I do him one better and take a walk around the lobby, even stopping for a cup of cucumber water bythereceptiondesksinceI’mnotfamiliarwithhisshittingpatternssohavenoideahowmuc time he needs.

“You okay, dear?” The receptionist with the pearl earrings asks in a tone that lets me know shedoesn’tthinkIam.Iassureherthatyes,I’mfine,greateven,andthenImakemywayback up to the room.

“Sowhatshouldwedotoday?”Mr.Korgyasks,bitingacrisppieceofbacon.“Imean, assuming you want to spend the day together…”

ItellhimthatofcourseIdo,andhesuggestswetakeawalk,ordriveouttoWasillatoget some food or catch a movie.

Afterwecheckoutofthehotel,wewindupdoingallthree.Firstthewalk,thenanearly dinner at some hole-in-the-wall Thai spot, then the movie.

The walk is lengthy and the conversation gushes, all the things we’ve been waiting to talk aboutspillingout,dovetailingeachother.KorgysaysthathethoughtI’dnevertalktohimaga and that the last few days were the scariest of his life. I apologize but he says I shouldn’t.

Thatheneededthekickintheass.Hestartsrattlingoffplansanimatedly,andIwonderifit’sbe oftheexcitementabout hisnewlife withmeor ifit’sjustthe spikefromhis threecupsofcoffee.

OceanofPDF.com

“I’m gonna give Gwen some space,” he says. “Let things cool off. I wish I had the balls to tellherwhyIleft,tobetotallytransparent,IknowIoweherthat… butthatwilljusttakesome time, I think.”

Hesaystherealityofthesituationwouldprobablybetoopainfulforher,thathewantsto have mercy.

“Also I’m not sure she’d understand,” he says. “I mean, frankly I still don’t in some ways. Stillcan'tbelieveit…Butlifeisweird,right? Wecan’thelpwhoorwhatwelove,whoorwhat we want. Might be the most honest thing about people - what we want.”

We talk about our plans moving forward, for how and when to ingratiate the other into our life, a topic I’m embarrassed to admit I’d never even thought about. When I’d fantasized about us, I’d always just thought about us. Him and I. The bubble. I’d never zoomed out. Expanded the context. Thought about what it might be like to hang out at backyard barbeques with his friends and their kids, who are probably closer in age to me than I am to Korgy’s friends. Or goingouttodinnerwithhisseventy-year-oldmother,attemptingtocarrysomeformofsocially acceptable dinner conversation, the content of which I have no fucking idea.

“Idon’t thinkwe haveto rushinto tellingpeople,” Isay.

“I’msorelievedyousaidthat,”hesays.“Icompletelyagree.I’dbehappytointroduceyou anybody if it’s important to you but I think it’d be best if we let the dust settle a bit first.”

“For sure,” I say, “And even after the dust settles, I’m definitely not telling my mom.”

“Wellwe’llhavetoatsomepoint,”hesays,“Butthat’sdowntheline.Wecanfigurethat out.”

BythetimewesitdownattheThaiplace,theconversationslows.Itsurprisesme,thefirst awkward beats with one another. Not charged. Not frantic. Not giddy. Just empty lulls that

OceanofPDF.com

stretch in length and that we both try to hide by studying our menus very intently. Have we reallyalreadysaideverything? Therewassomuchpentup,somuchthatneededdissectingand exploring, this profound life shift for the both of us, and we covered it all in a couple hours?

"Thechickensataylooksprettygood."

"Mmm. Yeah."

Every time we've been together before this, we've been racing against a ticking clock, trying tohidesowedon'tgetcaught,shoehorningallofourfeelingsforeachotherintohungrysexan hushed conversations, our limited access to each other fueling our desire even more, a sexual supply and demand. Every second was risky and dangerous, frenzied and exhilarating. But now there's so much space. And so much time. And so much of each other. Scarcity is tension.
Excess is… whatever thisis.

"I'mleaningpadseeew,"hesays.

"Cool. I'm

thinking tom

khakai."

"Anddowesharethechickensatayasanappetizer?""Sure."

It feels strange talking about such trivial things with him. Things we didn't have time to talk aboutbefore.Domestic,logisticalthingsthatseemanti-climacticgiventhecircumstancesittook to get to them. The odds we were up against. The obstacles we overcame. The nine grueling, nail-biting, adrenaline-charged months of up-and-down whirlwind on-again-off-again will-we-won't-wechaos,allto talkaboutchickensatay?

WeplayfootsieunderthetableandIfeelanuptickinmyheartrate,soItrytotakethingsa

step further by moving my foot to his crotch, but then the food arrives. The chicken satay's lukewarm and a little chewy, but the main's are good.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Wegettothetheatreandsitinthebackrow.WeshakeaboxofRaisinetsintoajumbobagof buttered popcorn and Korgy gives me his sweater since I'm cold. He occasionally whispers his assessment of the movie into my ear - a well-delivered line here, a bad cut there. It's a little distracting but I don't mind since the movie's boring.

Bythetimeweleavethetheater,it'sstilllightoutduetoAlaska'sbloated19-hoursofsunin the summertime, and my soul feels the bloat.

"Ourfirstfulldaytogether,"Mr.Korgysaysaswegetinhiscar.Heelbowsmelikehe's beingplayfulbuthiseyesarescouringandneedy."Ihopeyou'renotgettin'sickofme…"

IassurehimthatI'mnotasatightballtwistsinthepitofmystomach.Mustbethebutteredp

*OceanofPDF.com*

TheCaptainCook,Irealize,wastheone-night-onlyI-just-left-my-wifedeluxehotelspecial,the I-want-to-impress-you splurge, the let-me-convince-myself-I-made-the-right-choice-by-treating-myself-to-a-100%-goose-down-comforter-and-room-service-pancakes extravaganza. This, the Bird Creek Motel, is the reality. A dingy room that reeks of must and a left-behind half-empty carton of sour milk in the minifridge.

"So, it's not*not*the Bates Motel," he says, half-laughing as we examine the room, "But I figureit'sfineshort-term.Can'timagineit'lltakemelongerthanaweekortwotofindadecentapartment."

Iliethatit'skindofcharmingevenasIstareataquestionablestainintheshapeofTexasand nearlythesizeofitonthetatteredburgundycarpet.Hecallsmeoutforlying,andwelaugh,and Isaythatevenwithmywhitetrashbackground,thisisunsavory,andwelaughsomemore,the we lift the mattress to unironically check for bed bugs but instead find a plastic pen bearing the motel's logo leaking ink onto the top of the bed skirt.

"Well,it'snotbedbugs,"Korgyshrugs.

"It's not bed bugs,"

I agree.

*OceanofPDF.com*

**(new)**

Thefirstfewdaysatthemotelarelongandsprawling,spenttangledineachother'sarmsonthe bed with the quilted comforter folded down because we don't trust it. I've called in favors and had my shifts covered at work so that I can indulge the basking. We order delivery for every meal, and between meals we have long talks and sleepy, warm sex and watch old 40s movies -*His Girl Friday*and*Rope*and*Woman of the Year* -until we order the next meal. After sex or before it or sometimes during, Korgy looks at me and says something romantic like "I'm so happy we're together" or "You make me feel better than I've ever felt before" or "I love you so much it scares me." And I swallow his words, let my body fully digest them and get high off them, and then regurgitate them right back to him so he can do the same.

Bythethirdnight,Ifinallyneedsomefreshairandalonetime.Itrytotakeaneveningwalk but Korgy says he might as well stretch his legs, so we wind up doing that together too.

*OceanofPDF.com*

**(new)**

I'vereturnedtoworksothatIdon'tlosemyjob.IcomestraighttothemoteleverynightafterI get off, sometimes bringing him dinner, whatever has the shortest line in the food court at the mall, or something quick on the drive home, Chipotle or Bear Tooth or BiscuitClub.

"Hi beautiful," he'll say when I walk in the door, and then he'll point out whatever new addition he added to the place to make it feel more homey. A ceramic-potted cactus on the credenza, a citrus scented three-wick candle on top of the toilet tank in the bathroom, or cheap blackoutblindssuction-cuppedtothewindowssowecansleepbetterwithoutthelightpouring in through the thin curtains.

ButtodaywhenIswipemy keycard,it'snotjustaplant oraknick-knackwaitingforme.

Thereareoveradozenlargebrownboxespiledontopofeachother,someofthemonthebed, some of them on the corners of the credenza, many of them opened with household items spilling out - grilling tools and face razors, swim trunks and computer keyboards. There are so manyboxesthatthere'sonlyanarrowpathwaytoaccessthekitchenetteorthebathroomorth desk in the corner of the room. The desk that Korgy sits at, hunched over his laptop, typing rigorously as the glow from the screen lights up his face.

"Whathappened?"Iask.

"One

sec."

Hekeepstyping,andtyping,andtyping,untilhelandsattheendofhissentenceand theatrically punches the period key.

“Whew,sorry,didn’twannalosethethought,”hesays.“Hi,baby.”Hegetsuptokissmea
a box topples over.

OceanofPDF.com

“What’sgoingon?”Iaskagain.

“Gwentexted,”heexplains,resettingthebox.“Saidthatsheputallmystuffoutonourfron lawn, and that if I didn’t grab it it’d be at Goodwill in the morning. Didn’t even text me back when I asked if I could at least see Greg when I went to get it.”

“Jesus. I’msorry.”

“You know what, it’s fine. It’s totally fine,” he says, sitting back down to resume his typing. “She’s in a tough spot and I get that. And she’s taking it out on me, and I get that too. But I know that eventually the dust will settle and whatever needs to be ironed out will be ironed out. Custody,whateverelse… it’llgetfiguredout.It’llallbefine.Andinthemeantime,it’sfinetoo. Better than fine. It’s good. This is good for me. I need time to settle into my new life. My fresh start. This is my second chance, you know? My opportunity to pursue my own wants, my own needs, my own dreams.”

“Uh-huh…”

“I’mgettingbackintomynovel,”hesays,pickinguphisprinted-outcopyfromtheedgeof his desk and wagging it in my face. “I’ve been typing on it for the past five hours. Can’t stop. It’s just flowing. Absolutely flowing.”

“Wow,”Isay,notknowingwhatelseto.

“It’sgood,Waldo,”henods.“Icanmakeitgood.”

“I bet,” I say. “I bet.”

OceanofPDF.com

Iheadhomeforthefirsttimeinweekstograbsomefreshclothes.WhenIwalkinthedoor,the apartment is glistening. Or, as glistening as a dumpy dingbat from the 70s with a ripped couch and a flickering light can be. No dishes in the sink, no overflowing trash bin, no dust bunnies crawling across the linoleum like miniature tumbleweeds.

"Oh, hi hun," Mom says over her shoulder as she scrapes thecountertop.

Idumpmybackpackonthefloorandtakeinmoreoftheplace.Shinycountertopsandfloor clutter-free surfaces, the smell of fresh laundry wafting through the air.

"What'sthematter,doll,whyyoulookin'atmelikethat?"

Theonlyothertimethehousewasthiscleanwasthesummerafter Iturnedten,whenAllan themalenurse,proposedtoher.Momgotallgiddyandsuddenlybecametheversionofhersel she could never manage to be for herself, or for me. She did a deep clean of the house, made a car payment instead of blowing her paycheck on the usual Burlington Coat Factory shopping spree, took us to Goodwill to find some new furniture, even signed me up for the gymnastics classes I'd been wanting to take. It was an exciting time. For the month or so it lasted. Until Allan left town with no warning and never came back. I tried to comfort Mom, tell her Allan was kinda creepy anyway, like all male nurses. But she was already too deep in her spiral. The house got dirty again and the gymnastics classes were dropped before the eight-week session was over. I never even got to try the uneven bars.

"Sitdown,sweetheart,I'vegotsomethin'totellya,"Momsays.Sheguidesmetothekitch table, yanks up the drop-leaf, and sits down opposite me.

OceanofPDF.com

"So, Tony started acting kinda strange and I got that awful nauseous feeling in my gut, thought I smelled a breakup comin'. So of course I start pullin' out all the stops, trying to keep him, wearing my good perfume, my new panties, strip eyelashes, all of that crap. I was doin' it all. And with all the anxiety I was not sleeping, not eating, running on coffee and Trident gum, thekindyou'vegottapopoutofthefoilpacks.Tasteslikeassbutmakesyourbreathsmellgoo go figure. So then I'm workin' the late shift one night with Margie, right? And she goes, 'hun, are you alright? You look like you haven't slept in ages.' So I tell her what's goin' on and she tells me I oughtta join her for some sex-and-love-anononymous meetup group she's a part of.

And I've got nothin' better to do so I join her, right? And there's people telling spiels about ramming their cars into walls after breakups, sneaking in their husbands' trunks to catch them mid-affair,callingtheirs.o.'sworkplacefiftytimesaday,andeachtimeI'mthinking,'heythat's me! Hey that's me again! They're all a buncha fucked up crazies just like me.' Never felt more home than I did in that meeting."

Momdigsinherpurseandpullsoutaglossypamphletwithblueandpurplelettering.She flips it open and shoves it in my face, tapping excitedly on a portion she's already circled.

"Look at that," she says, craning her neck to read it to me. "*Typical signs of love addictioninclude:mistakingintensesexualexperiencesandnewromanticexcitementforl craving and searching for a romantic relationship. An unhealthy fixation on another person which may include excessive fantasizing and obsessive compulsions, potentially even stalking."*

Shelooksupatme."Imean,yourememberGary.I'dcallthatstalking,wouldn'tyou?"

She keeps reading. "*Achieving a sense of euphoria from the fantasizedrelationship, feelingdesperate or uneasy when separated from the partner, using the relationship to hide from negativefeelingsorsituations,excessiveinterestinthenewrelationshiptotheexclusionofo*

*OceanofPDF.com*

*interestsandresponsibilities,neglectingotherkeyrelationshipsinyourlifeforthesakeofpu*

*the fantasized relationship.*"

"Sweetheart!" Mom says, her eyes watery with recognition, "I figured it out. Or, rather, Margiefigureditoutforme,butstill… Theysaidinthemeeting'Nameittotameit'anditwas like a lightbulb went off for me. An epiphany. Can't fix a problem you don't know you have, right? Well now I know so now I can fix it. It's like a weight's been lifted."

"Wait,sowhathappenedwithTony?"Iask.

"Oh,yeah.Hebrokeupwithme!JustlikeIthoughthewould! Hestartsgivin'mesomecrap about the timing not being right and how we should still be friends, manspeak for keeping his options open cuz he's too much of a pussy to just say the truth, and then, in the middle of his speech, I just start laughin'. Just laughin' right in his fuckin' face. And he's looking all confused, like, 'I just broke up with this lady, just broke this lady's heart, and here she is laughin' at me. Is she crazy?' And yet I just can't stop, tears streaming down my cheeks I'm laughin' so hard."

"Why were you laughing?" Iask.

"Cuz*he*didn't break my heart. Oh God no. My heart was broken a long, long time ago. By yourfather.Maybeevenbeforethen.Maybebymyparents.OrmaybeIwasbornwithabroke heart, I dunno. But I do know that all I've ever done is gone man-to-man-to-man, with my broken little heart in a bunch of little pieces, asking him to fix it like a little girl asking a neighbor to buy her Girl Scout cookies. Begging. Pleading, you know? 'Please buy my Peanut Butter Patties'. 'Please fix my broken heart.' But the thing is, it's not his responsibility. My brokenheart.It'smyresponsibility.It'sathingIgottafix.Can'texpectnobodytogotakin'ca

of you before you take care of yourself.”

OceanofPDF.com

“That’s…profound?”Isay,moreasaquestion.

“That’sgood,isn’tit?

Hasaniceringtoit.Margietoldmethat.She’smysponsor.Ihavea sponsor, can you believe? Look at me go.”

Mom takes what seems like her first breath of the past five minutes and takes my hands in

hersacrossthetable,lookingatmewithanintensitythatisequalpartsconvictedandunstable

“Honey,”shesays,asteelylookinhereyes,“Thisprogramisgonnachangemylife.Alrea

*OceanofPDF.com*

Korgy finds a loft apartment on the second floor of a building downtown, and we move him in onaSaturdayafternoon.Theplaceissmall.Akitchenetteattachedtothelivingroom,shoebo bathroominthecorner, crampedbedroomwith areach-inclosetup thenarrowmetalstaircase.

"GoodthingI'mallowedtopaint,"hechuckles,noddingatthewalls.He'sinsecureabout place. It's strange, seeing him insecure in this way. I've seen him insecure in the past but it's been the kind that feels performative, the kind that feels like he's being cute with his insecurity, amplifying it to seek reassurance. Like when he calls himself an old fogey just so I'll tell him how much he isn't one. But this kind is different. There's nothing performative about it. It's the kind of insecurity you try to hide. The real kind.

We haul the boxes up to Korgy's place and finish with the mattress, reorienting it on our shoulderssevera ltimestogetitthroughthefrontdoor.WeunpackKorgy'sbooksfirst,lining them up on a built-in shelf in the living room as we go.

"Ohmygod,youhavetoreadthis,"hesaysasheplacesabeatenupoldcopyofDonQuixot on the shelf. "Greatest novel ever written. The work is… seminal."

Heshakeshisheadwithaself-importantreverence,likelovingapieceofartisthesameas creating it himself.

"Ooh,DavidFosterWallacetoo,"hesays,pickinguphiscopyof*InfiniteJest*."Thoughhe can get heady." He shows off another,*This Side of Paradise*."This one's got its moments. I actually like it better than Gatsby, though Fitgerald might be a bit flowery for you…"

“Yeah,he’snotforme.What’sthatsaying?‘Thesimplestsolutionisalmostalwaysthebe

*OceanofPDF.com*

"--

Occam'sRazor."Korgypuffshischestlikeanarrogantschoolboy,proudtoknowthe technical term.

"Sure,"Inod,"Occam'sRazor.That'showIfeelaboutwriting.Ilikewritingthat'ssimpl Plainlystatedobservations,nofluff.Idon'twannahear,'itwasthekindofmorningwithairso frigid that it makes your bones wail like a creaking staircase. Her mug of coffee steamed, its burnt scent wafting up to her rubbery nostrils. I wanna hear: it was a cold Tuesday. The coffee was burnt. Get to the point, you know?"

"Mmm. Then yeah, Fitzgerald's not foryou."

Wefinishunpackinghisbooksandhispostagestampcollectionandhistoiletries.Ipause when I get to his bottle of Jean Paul Gaultier and run my thumb along the pecs of the bottle. Look how far I've come.

We order Chinese food and devour it - green beans with garlic, honey chicken, beef lo mein, andeggrolls-

thenwefuckontheairmattresswithournastygarlicbreathandIalmostaskhim tobrushhisteethbutdecidethatwouldruinthemomentsoIsaynothing.Afterward,weunpac all of Korgy's clothes and end the night with his movie posters, all curled into rolls and popping out of an ill-fitting box.

"God, I'm so glad I'm finally getting to hang up my*Clockwork Orange*," he says, unfurling theposter and splayingit out on thewall. "Gwen never letme. Said it didn'tgo with thedecor."

"Luckilythere'snodecorinhereforittogowith…"

Korgy laughs, then hangs the poster on the wall, frameless, with dots of wall putty. The top

rightcornerofitwon'tstayputandkeepsflappingoveritself.Korgysmacksitwithhishand.It

finally stays.

OceanofPDF.com

“IlovethatyouletmebewhoIam,”hesays,deepintomysoul.Ismile,prayinghecan’tsee the fear behind my eyes. The top corner of the poster flaps over again.

*OceanofPDF.com*

The first time I don't want to have sex with him takes me by surprise. It's late and we've just poppedapanofpre-madechocolatechipcookiesintheoven.Korgygrabsmyhipsandleans toward me, my back pressing against the countertop.

"Wehavefourteenminutestilthey'redone,"hesays,thenstartskissingmyneck.

"Isthatenoughtime?"Iask,moreconcernedaboutbakedgoodsburningthanreachingcl

"Who cares?" he asks, pulling my face into his and kissing me hungrily. I try to kiss him back,tomatchhisfervor,butIcan'tquitegetthere.Hereachesouttomassagemyrightbreast, then pulls it out of my bra and sucks on my nipple while I stare at the Annie Leibovitz wall calendar and wonder how it already got to be July.

Herunshisfingeralongthenapeofmyneckandlicksmycollarboneashisotherhand migrates down my belly toward my skirt, then slips under the waistband of it.

IalreadyknowI'mdryandhe'sabouttofindout.Iworryhe'llbedisappointed,buthisha gets there and if he is, he doesn't let on. Just brings his index and middle fingers up to his mouth, spits on them, and brings them right back down to me. Problem solved. Only my body knows the difference between self-generated material and manufactured stuff. And there's something about the need for his extra support that makes a piece of me die. Will it be gone forever? Will it ever come back?

HeliftsmeontothecountertopandIfeelthecooltilesonmyasscheeks,andhisroundbelly pressingagainstmypubicbone.Ishutmyeyestotryandgetmoreintoitasheslideshistongue into my mouth, combing the grooves of my teeth with it.*Be here, be here, be here,*I order mybody.

OceanofPDF.com

“Where are you?” heasks.

“I’mhere,”Isay,asunconvincinglyasI’veeversaidsomething.

He wraps my legs around his waist then walks to the staircase with me on him, but it’s too narrowforustogoonconjoined,sohepeelsmeoff.Aswewalkup,hepressesmyhandagainst the hard block in his pants and groans as he guides me to stroke it.

On the bed, he peels off my clothes and slides down my legs to go down on me, raking his handsdownmythighs.Istareatthegreenceiling.Thereareniceshadesofgreenbutthisisn’t one of them. It’s the worst shade of green. Like vomit. I can’t imagine anyone intentionally choosingit.Strollingdownthepaintswatchaisleat HomeDepotandnoddingtowardthisone *I’ll take vomit.*

“Hey,bewithme,”hesays.

“Sorry,”Isay,pullingaway.

“Not

feeling

it?

“Um…”

“It’sokayifyouaren’t.”

“No,

I’m

not

really…”

“That’stotallyfine.Nopressure.”

“Thanks,” I say, but I can’t help feeling like there is. Not from him. But

from me. This is my firsttime“notfeelingit”.Notwantingit.Arelationshipmilestonenoonewantstostumbleov I certainly don’t. Is this how it happens? You don’t “feel it” once, then twice, then a third time, and a fourth, and a fifth, until you realize you “haven’t felt it” in months and that your physical contact with your partner has been reduced to Netflix snuggles and goodbye cheek-pecks? You start farting in front of each other and stop combing your hair, stop using your fingers to make

*OceanofPDF.com*

eachother cumand insteaduse themto popeach other'sbackzits?

OrmaybeI'mmakingitmorethanitis.Korgydoesn'tseemtomind.Saysit'stotallynorm and not to stress, then the oven timer beeps and he takes the cookies out and eats three, but I'm not hungry.

"Whydon'twegoforaswim?Tryoutthepool?"heasks."Couldbefun."

Wechangeintoourswimsuitsandheaddown.Korgyswipeshiskeythreetimes,thekeyp goingredeachtime,thenheblowsonhiskeycardasifthatwillhelpandtriesagain,repeatedly with no varying result. I spot the aluminum pool hours sign.

"Closedat nine," Isay.

"Nine?!"hesays,takingtheclosingtimepersonally."Mostpoolscloseatten!"

Iagreewithhimthatyes,mostpoolsdocloseatten,mostlytorelievehisexasperation.It seems to work. Sometimes people just need to be agreed with.

Backathisplace,Korgygetsacravingforapizza,soheordersonewhileIsitattheedgeof the bed in my swimsuit feeling empty and unfinished. I think about asking him to touch me again. To at least try to get my body revved up. But my body doesn't want to be. It wants to be here, limp and quiet. And something about that terrifies me.

"Foodshouldn'ttakelong,"Korgysaysashehangsupthephoneandlooksatmewitha level of excitement that unnerves me when it's about pizza.

"Twentyminutes.Halfcheese,halfmeatlovers."

I guess he's moved on

from salads.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Most nights, I come home from work hungry and tired. Half the time, Korgy has something alreadyprepared,tacosorsalmonorpastabolognese,hisaunt'srecipe.He'lltakeoffhisapro kissmeonthecheek,andscoopwhateveritisontomyplatewhileweunpackthegrievancesof our days - me complaining about an unruly customer, him complaining about a story problem he'sstuckonforhisnovel,orsomepassiveaggressivetextfromGwen,orhowharditistofind a good divorce lawyer.

"I'mbracingmyselfforahellishcustodybattle,"he'llsay,shakinghishead."Sostressed can hardly eat."

And then he'll take a bite ofbolognese.

Theotherhalf,weorderin,aprocesswithagestationperiodofanhour.Wecan'thelpit.

That's just how long it takes to order food. We'll scroll through UberEats, trying to find "something new", using keywords to search for something that sounds good, "Vietnamese" or "Mediterranean", a moot point really because we already know what sounds good never looks goodandthatwe'regonnalandonofourthreetried-but-truespots-LahnPadThai,BearTooth, or Jersey Mike's.

After we eat, we cuddle up and Korgy pops on a movie he wants me to see, some arthouse movie or foreign film that he likes to remind me we'd never be able to watch if not for his Criterion Collection subscription, as if that subscription is something exclusive you have to be invitedinto,andnotjustsomethingthatcostselevenbucksamonth.Whilewewatch,herelay his thoughts as if they're the director's cut commentary and I struggle to

keep my eyes open. It is inhumane to be expected to read subtitles past 10pm. A week ago, I made a joke about

OceanofPDF.com

sometimeswantingtoshutoffmybrainandwatch*Survivor*,butthejokedidn'tgooverwell,s
we watched*Buffalo 66*instead.

We eat cold cereal at the kitchen counter as a midnight snack then make our way to the bathroom where we squish together at the single sink, pretending we don't notice the food particlesandballsofplaquethatflyoffofeachother'sstringsofflossandhitthesidesofthe sink bowl, or, on unluckier occasions, smack onto the mirror, waiting to be wiped off with a crumpledbitoftoiletpaper.Afterward,wefallasleepineachother'sarms.Or,rather,Korgy fallsasleep,andIlaywideawakeuntilthreeorfourinthemorning,mythoughtscyclicaland whirring like the rickety fan that spins on the ceiling above me.

The mundanity is crushing. The routinization of domestic life, excruciating. A never-ending pile of bland logistics and interchangeable exchanges, each day bleeding into the next, nothing differentiating the two. Breaking up crossed my mind a week ago. Just the flash of a thought. ButIcutitoffrightaway,refusingtoengage.Whowouldthatmakeme,toleavesomeonewho left so much to be with me? I owe him this, don't I? My unwavering commitment. My undying love. Or at least my body. In 4D. With bells and whistles.

Tostaveoffthebordomandwhateverliesunderit,I'vegonebacktomyshoppingbinges load up a big cart or two every night, at least a dozen sale items per cart, and wait for the multiple shipments to arrive while I nurse that all-too-familiar feeling of anxious uncertainty mixed with delusional optimism. That feeling that this thing might be the thing that makes all the difference. A feeling of hope. A feeling I miss.

But then the things arrive, and they're all disappointing, and the

stitching is bad, and the fabricis see-through, and they go back in the bag for me to return, my head low withregret.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Itrytofindotherwaystobringsomeelementofnewnesstomydays,“healthieralternative to shopping and Cheetos. I apply for a manager position at work and get it. I buy a gym membership at The Alaska Club and go once a week. I take up journaling again. I even consider asking Frannie to meet up, but I don’t. Don’t want to reignite something that’s done. She’d been reaching out pretty regularly at the start of summer, and I’d blow her off, and then she’d reach out a little less regularly, and I’d blow her off, and then she just stopped reaching out at all. It’s funny,Ithoughtourfriendshipwouldenddramatically,theinsultswe’dbeensavingupforye shot back and forth, tears and snot streaking our faces. But instead, the ending has been uneventful, petering out with almost no noise at all. Maybe that’s how you know it’s really anending.

*OceanofPDF.com*

esseshismorningwoodagainstme.

"Yourassfeelssonice,"hesays,andItwisttoavoidhismorningbreath."Myguywantsyo

Herecentlystartedreferringtohispeniswiththispetnamethatsendsachilldownthenape of my neck every time.

"Baby," he says, pressing himself into my ass crack. His hand cups my right buttock then slaps it as I try to remind myself that I am attached to this buttock, that it belongs to me, despite my feeling completely divorced from it. His hand slides under my shirt and he draws it up my bellyandtracescirclesaroundmynipples.Inegotiatewithmybody,askingitleadingquestio like a parent to their toddler.*This feels nice, doesn't it? Doesn't this feel nice?*

Andmybodyrespondslikeatoddler.Completelyunabletoseeoutsideofitself.*No.Thisd feel nice. I don't like this. Get him off of me.*

Still,Ireachbehindmeandstrokehisdick.

"Mmm, that's my

girl," Korgy moans.

It's not about indulging him. It's about proving something to myself. That I'm not some haggard eighteen-year-old who already lost her libido. That I still desire him. That we're not slowly shriveling into one of "those couples", like roommates, who burp and bicker and can only agree on which flavor of Doritos is best (cool ranch). Who plug sex into the calendar and still can't muster the drive to have it half the time, making up excuses neither of us believe but bothofuspretendto-"I'vegotaheadache"or"Ithinkthatshrimpwasbad"or"Ihavetobeup early." Both willing participants in the performance of a healthy relationship,

too scared to accept that it’s actually just a dead one.

OceanofPDF.com

Maybemyworriesareunfounded.KorgyseemedtothinksowhenIbroughtthemupafew nights back as we got ready for bed.

"Hey,"Isaid,pausingmybrushingasifIwasjustrealizingitatthatverymomentandnotat all that I had been fixating on it half the day, "We haven't had sex in a week."

"Huh,"hesaidasherubbedinhisfoamingfacewash."Ihadn'tthoughtaboutitbutIguess you're right. Do you care?" he asked.

Ithrewbackacapofmouthwashandgargled,buyingtimetolevelmynervoussystem,the spit in the sink and tried to sound easygoing.

"No," I said, wiping my mouth with a towel. But he knew I was full ofshit.

"Hey, hey," he said, touching my shoulder. "It's totally normal. This is what an adult relationship is. Tons of sex in the beginning, adrenaline, that intoxicating rush, fueled by the uncertaintyofwhetherornotitwillworkout,andthenthecommitmentsolidifiesandthedust settles. Less exciting, sure, less of a rush. And, yes, unfortunately, less sex. But more sustainable. Healthier. Better."

Ipretendedtobecomforted,butIcouldhardlysleepthatnight,trappedbymydouble-bind: hating that we're not having sex, but also not wanting to have it.

"Puthiminyourmouth,"Korgysays,soIlowermyselftohimandpulldownhisboxers.A cheese-like smellwafts upand Iforce myselfnot togag asI bringmy lipsto hiscock andstart trying to recreate the blowjobs I gave him early on.

That'swhatsexisformenow.Recreating-orattemptingtorecreate-howthingswereinthe beginning, when sex represented the affections, the desires, the wishes, hopes, and dreams. The longing. The promise of what could be. The chemistry. The potential. When sex represented all the things we couldn't say.

OceanofPDF.com

Now,sexrepresentstheapologies,thedifferences,thedisconnection.Themourning.Th

acceptance.Themelancholyforwhatusedtobe.Still,thethingswecan'tsay.Justdifferentth

"That feels incredible," he moans, and I try to read his tone, to decode every micro-inflection.

Isheattemptingtorecreatehispleasurejustthesameas Iam?Tryingtosellittome?

Orishe just easier to please, actually present and enjoying it?

"Come here, let me touch you," he says, half-asleep. Before his hand gets to me, I quietly hawk spit up from the back of my throat, the phlegmiest I can get to recreate the texture of my discharge,andusemyfingertipstospreaditontomyself,thenIcrawltowardhimonmyknees and let him touch me.

"Aww,baby,"hesays,"Isallthisforme?Isthishowmuchyouwantme?"

Sameashefuckingalwaysdoes.Abrokenrecord.Apullstringtoythatspewsthesame catchphrase over and over until you want to chuck it out the window.

"Yeah,thisishowmuchIwantyou,baby,"Iwhine-say.I'mnobetter.Ire-usemysame catchphrases and inflections too, slowly morphing into a caricature of my sexual self.

Mr. Korgy pulls my legs toward him and licks me. It tickles, which irritates me. So I pull awayandclimbontohiminstead,swervingmyhipswiththesamerhythmicswirlingmotions always. Swoosh. Swoosh. Swoosh.

"Wow,baby,"Korgysays.

*What's wow?*I want to scream.*Nothing's wow about this. You're not wow and I'm not wowand both of us together are not wow. This is boring, sad, vanilla, tired sex. Because we're boring, sad, vanilla, tired people. People who were only brought together because of how*

*fuckinglostwebothwere.Allittooktogetheredoesn'tmatter.Theforbiddenlove.Theagega*

*OceanofPDF.com*

*Thebrokenmarriage.Thecasualties.Noneofitmatters,becauseattheendoftheday,we'ree*

*like every other couple.*

Ishutmyeyesandremindmyself.It'sonlysex.It'sonlysex.It'sonlysex.

Then again, the sex has never just been about sex. It's been about what the sex has communicatedtome.AndasIridehimtocompletionandheexplodesonmytitsandgoesto get a rag to clean me up, I don't like what it's communicating to me now.

*OceanofPDF.com*

*Areyouonyourwayyet?*
*I'mexcitedtoseeyou!*

Isithereonthefloorwithmylegssplayedout,paintingmytoenailsbetweenbigspoonfuls of Frosted Flakes. The color's hideous - a shocking turquoise shade with sparkle in it. I regret the purchase and whoever I thought I was when I made it, but it's the only polish I own that hasn't gone goopy. At least it's quick-dry.

Eightminuteslater,anothertextcomesthrough.

*Sorrytobugya,I'msureyougotcaughtupwithsomething.Justletmeknowwhenyou'reo way. I'll wait to put the salmon on until then!*

Ileanovertostudythegraybubble,flatandlifeless.Thegraybubblethatseemsdesignedt sucktheemotionfromaperson,toreducethemtolettersandtinycartoondrawings.Tocontai them. And yet, it can't. Emotion prevails. Bleeds through. Bursts the bubble.

Ipickupmyphonetosendamessagethatwillquellhisanxiety,somethingreassuringand littledishonest,butbeforeIcan,anewtextcomesthroughwiththatannoyingbloop,thesoun of a pleading question mark.

*Justmakingsureyou'reokay…?*
*Thoughtyouweregonnabeherehalfanhourago…*

I drop my phone into my lap, repelled by it. Repelled by him. By his neediness. By his teetering self-esteem, so conditioned on my adoration of him. An adoration that is rapidly waning, partially due to his dependence on it. It's a dizzying loop of a catch-22, and I'm a hypocrite. Just months ago, I was the pathetic one. Desperate and maddeningly needy, my wellbeingsolelydependantonhowresponsivehewastomethatday.Andnow,hereIam,not

OceanofPDF.com

grantinghimthereassuringresponseheneeds.Lettinghimworry,lettinghimpanic,whileIs here painting my toenails.

Ijustifymystalling,consideringit"me-time".Ihaven'tevenbeenhomeinaweek,andthe last time was just to grab clothes. Nothing wrong with needing to recoup.

ButI knowI'm lyingto myself. Thisisn't stalling.This isavoidance.

*sorry!*

Itextfinally,theexclamationmarksimultaneouslymeagerandpointed.*headingoutina sec.*I don't give him an explanation.

*Noworriesatall!Gladyou're okay!I'llputonthesalmon!*

He tacks on a little salmon nigiri emoji which doesn't make sense since we're not having sushi. I get what he was going for but the reach irks me, and instead of heading for the door, I decide now is the right time to clean out my bathroom drawers. I dig through them, purging the regretted purchases and the ones past their shelf life. I throw away wrong shades of foundation, rancid perfume, soured lip balms, blushes with the labels worn off, crusty mascaras, eyebrow pencils worn down to nubs, crumbled bronzers, gunky highlighters. It feels good, getting rid of all the promises I used to believe. The products I've tried that didn't work. Or that worked for a timebutdon'tanymore.There'ssomethingfreeinginadmittingthat.Thefailure.Orthegrov Or maybe they're the same thing.

I run a baby wipe through my newly purged bathroom drawers and move onto my closet. Tights from Amazon and rusted jewelry from Marshall's and jeans from Shein with bunchy crotches.BlousesInevercouldfigureoutwhichbratowearwithandcheap-polyestertrousers you can see through and tank tops with straps that dig into

my shoulders. I fill trash bag after

trashbagforGoodwillsosomebodyelsecanusethesethings.Getsomethingfromthem.But

can’t anymore. I’ve let so many expired things fill up my life. So many things

I know don’t

*OceanofPDF.com*

work but keep around because of sunken costs or sentimentality or something else. Laziness or fear.There'ssomethingscaryaboutlettinggo.Eveniftheemptinessmakesroomforsomethbetter. Because I don't know what the something better is. Or if it's coming. Maybe it won't. AndmaybeI'llregretgettingridofthosebunchy-crotchedSheinjeans.Ididlikethesnapbuttonclosure.

*Salmon'sdone!Youclose?*

Apitinmystomach.*hey-sorryagain.wentonacleaningrampageandgotsupertired.think i have to call it a night. save me a piece of salmon for tomorrow?*

Those three ominous, calculating dots pop up, the universal sign for "I'm deciding which pathI'mgonnatake.Thesociallyacceptable,calculatedtext,orthetruthful,impulsiveone." Korgy opts for the socially acceptable.

*I'msorryIwon'tseeyou,butyou'vegotitrethesalmon! I'llkeepthedillsauceonthesideso it doesn't get soggy.*

Then he sends another emoji of salmonnigiri.

OceanofPDF.com

"Nottoobigandpoofy,Idon'twannalooklikeIcrawledouttathe70s,"Momsays,half-laughing. "But also not too limp. Just a nice, easy beach wave."

"Gotit,"Isay,wrappingherhairaroundtheiron.

Momaskedmetodoherhairforacoffeemeetupwithhersponsor.Saidshecan'treachtheback pieces herself and that I'm probably better with an iron anyway.

"FromallthosevideosyouwatchonTikTok,"shesaid.

"I'm not on Tiktok," I said.

"Wellstill,it'sinyourblood.You'reoftheage."

Can't argue that.

"AreyouexcitedtoseeMargie?"Iask.

"Geesh,goodmemory.Yeah,yeah.She'sahoot.Shouldbefun.Well,honestlyfunisn'ttherightword forit.Kindatheexactoppositewordforitactually.It'shardwork.Hardfuckingwork.Shestartedhavin' me do all this diggin' into my childhood. We've been talking about how I had no discipline as a kid. My dadrunnin'aroundonmyma,mymarunnin'aroundonmydad,neitherof'emhadanytimeforme,soI was raised on sugary cereals and bad sitcoms and boys I shouldn't have been with. And it wasn't my parents' fault. I mean it was and it wasn't. Or, it was*then*but it's not*now*. It's not their fault anymore.

They both couldn't be deader and here I am still living in these patterns that were set in place by them when I was five. Margie says it's time to reset these patterns. Establish new ones. Really focus on rebuildingmylife.Findingmyselfinsteadofavoidingmyselfwithmen.Shesaysthebestwaytodothat is through no contact."

"What's'nocontact?'"

"Basicallyit's60dayswhereIcan'tspeakto,text,meetupwith,sleepwith,orengageinanyway with any man I've been sexually or romantically involved with in the past. Even if nothing's ever

OceanofPDF.com

happenedwithaguyandIjustfeellikesomethingcould,Ican'tinteractwithhimeither.Nothin'.Nocontact."

Mom'shairsizzlesfromtheiron.Apunctuationmark.Iletthelockfallandstartwrappingthenextone.

"Andyou'regonnadoit?"

"Already started! The whole idea is that it's supposed to help me observe my instincts and urges andall my emotions underneath those urges so that I can replace all my unhelpful behaviors with better ones. Like, instead of texting a man, make a cup of tea or whatever. I mean, if you ask me, there's no chamomilethatcanreplaceagooddickbutgottastartsomewhereIguess.Sorry.Justspeakingthetruth."

Mompicksapieceoflintoffhershirtandflicksit.

"How far in are you?" I ask.

"Ten days. And a half. First few days were the hardest. I was havin' withdrawals. Gasping for air kindathing.Borderlinepanicattacks.Butit'sgettin'easier.Daybyday.AndIknowit'sgonnabeworth it. Gonna be great for my future. Our future. You know what Margie said is gonna happen once I start takin' better care of myself?"

"What?"

"Shesaidit'llleadtometakin'bettercareofyou.That'swhyIcouldn'talltheseyears.Cuzhowwas I supposed to know how to treat my daughter if I'm treatin' myself like shit, right?"

"Right…"

"AndI'mnotaskingforforgiveness,doll.Idon'tdeservethat.Ijustwanttoapologizeandtoletyou know that I'm gonna try my damndest to earn your trust. I'm gonna be a better mother to you, sweetheart. You deserve that. You always have. I'm gonna be there for you in a way I've never been before. Okay? Because I love you. You're the best thing in my life."

"Well…thanks.That'sreallynice.Butalso,Igetit.Thingsweretoughforyou.Beingateenmom with no support."

OceanofPDF.com

“Toughgodoesn’tmeanyougottamakesomebodyelse’stough,too.I’msickofmyownbullshit,” she says as she looks out the window with longing, twenty years of regret crystallizing in this one moment. It’s a strange thing, seeing your mother grow up.

“Youknowwhatweoughtado?”sheasks,onlyherfacedoesn’tlightupthewayitusuallydoeswhen she asks it cause she knows it’s not a new idea, but an old one, one she finally wants to make good on.

“Let’stakeatripouttoSewardthisweek.Butlet’sreallydoitthistime,”shesays.“ThistimeImean it.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

Even before he said it, I knew something was off. I got that feeling, when I walked in the door, liketheairwasbeingpulledtaut,liketherewasalandminesomewhere,boundtobetrippedon onewayoranother.I'malmostrelievedithappenedsoimmediately,beforeIhadthechancet fool myself into thinking there was anything I could do to prevent it.

"You'rehomelate…"hesays,scratchingthespotbehindhisearthatalwaysseemstoitch when he's uncomfortable.

Idumpmybackpackonthefloorandtrytosoundascasualaspossible."Yeah,Istayedabit after my shift to help out. The place was a wreck from the summer sale…"

Heshakeshishead,apparentlytakingthenewsofthesalesfloor'sdisarraypersonally,the lets out a sound somewhere between a scoff and a snort that I pretend not to hear.

"I'mgettingpaidovertime,"Ishrug,kickingoffmyshoes."It'snotabigdeal."

He brings his glass of scotch to his lips and downs the last sip pointedly, as if to assure me that,yes,infact,itisabigdeal.I'mguessingit'shisthirdglass,basedontheglossinessofhis eyes and the fact that he's been on his third glass by this time every night for the past coupleweeks.

"Well,I'mgonnawashupandwatchsome*Survivor*inbed."

It's hard to say what came first. His nightly alcohol indulgence or my nightly*Survivor*indulgence,orwhethertheybeganatexactlythesametime,ourrespectivef insync,anannoyingironyconsideringthethingwe'rebothavoidingishowoutofsyncwe've

OceanofPDF.com

“It’sawasteofyourtime,”hesayswhenI’mhalfwaytothebathroom,alreadyyankingmy hair tie out.

“I know,” I say, rubbing out the sore spot on my scalp where my hair tie just was. “But it’s fun,andactuallyaprettygoodtestamenttothehumanspirit.Plus,Ineedsomethingtohelpme unwind after a long workday.”

“NotSurvivor,”hesayssharply.“Imean,thattoo,butIwastalkingaboutyourjob.”

Ah, the fight before the fight. The thing that isn’t really The Thing, but that is A Thing. A smaller thing. A more manageable thing. A thing that we can both agree to disagree on and talk incirclesaboutforthetimebeinguntilthebraveroneofusisabletosaytherealer,uglierthing. But, for now, this is our placeholder.

“Idon’tthinkit’sawasteoftime,”Isaywithaput-onairofsmugness.I’msurehecansee through the false bravado but I need it. Some armor.

“Really? Youthinkyou’relearningallkindsofpivotallifelessonsmonitoringsome clearance rack of tacky lingerie?”

“Actually,yes,Ido,”Isay.“I’mlearningaboutconsumerism.Aboutthelonelinessof women. About the human condition.”

It’snot*not*true.MyshiftsatVictoria'sSecrethavegivenmeapeekintoawoman’spsyche thatisbothvaluableanddepressing.Still,it’saminimumwageretailjob.Ithasitslimitations. At least it sounded nice.

“Wellgoodthen,”hesays,“GladtohearVictoria’sSecretissuchasolidreplacementforc

“I have no interest incollege.”

OceanofPDF.com

"You'regoingtopissawayyourpotential,"hesays,hiswordsslurred.Mightbehisfourth

He looks at me with clinging, bloodshot eyes that I want to look away from, but don't becausethatwouldfeellikebackingdown,soinsteadIforceastaringcontest.Whoeverlooks away first loses. What they lose, I don't know, but they lose something.

"Yourfutureisimportant,"hesays."Youneedtomaketimeforyourfuture.Prioritizeyou

"Myfutureisputtingtoomuchpressureonme,"Isay,adamant,andhelooksaway, admitting defeat.

"Youknow…"Istart,notwantingtofinish,butneedingto."MaybeI'mjustnotwhatyou looking for."

There's a heavy, almost suffocating silence between us. Korgy is motionless, his face blank andunreadable.Thenheshutshiseyesandforasecond Ithinkhe'slettingthetranquilityripple through him as he realizes he agrees, but then he opens them again, and they're blazing, and he slams his fist down on the end table next to him.

"Fuck!" he yells, not scaring me, but fueling me. "I knew this would happen. I*knew*this wouldhappen.You'reapursuer.Achaser.Youwantandyouwantandyouwant,andyou're fuckingravenousaboutit.Itconsumesyou.Butthenonceyougetwhatyouwant,youdon't want it anymore. It's the most immature thing about you."

"WellI'msorryI'msoimmature,Iguessthat'swhathappenswhenyoudateaneighteen-year-old."

*OceanofPDF.com*

Hesmirksascorned,ridiculingsmirkandbiteshislip,bitingdownhisanger.“Right.Of course. You’re an adult when you want me to leave my family, and you’re a kid when it’s convenient for you.”

There’saflashofsomethingnewinoursharedlook,acertaindisgustthathasn’tbeenthere before. A glimpse into just how much resentment has stacked up, and it’s unnerving.

Igrabmybackpackandhurlitovermyshoulder.“I’mgoinghome.”

Andinstantly,hisvenomfromfivesecondspriorisreplacedwithasweaty,squirrelyanxi

“Hey, wait, wait a second.”

“What?” I ask, and I’m proud of how aloof I sound. Howunscathed.

“I’m…

drunk,”hesays.“I’mdrunkandstressed.It’sbeenabadweekofwriting.Ihaveno ideawheretotakethenovel.Gwenwon’tletmeseeGregory.IfeelbadaboutmyselfandI’m taking it out on you. And I’m sorry.”

Isetmybackpackdownagainandsitattheedgeofthecouchnexttohim.Hepullsmeinfor a hug, draping his arms around me and stroking my back with his big, warm hands.

“It’sokay,”Isay,“I’msorrytoo.”

Andwelookateachotherwithasad,knowingforgiveness.Sad,thatthere’sanythingto forgive in the first place. And knowing, that it won’t be the last time.

ThecornerofhisClockworkOrangeposterflapsover.Korgylooksatitbutdoesn’tgetup

“Needs command strips or something,” he sighs. “The putty’s not enough.”

OceanofPDF.com

The invite to Frannie's going-away party came the night beforehand, like it'd been an afterthought, or a last-minute maneuver to hedge against possible low attendance, and the throwawaynatureofitmademewanttoseeher.Oneoflife'scrueljokes.Thelesssomeone needs you to show up for them, the more you want to.

People are heading out by the time I arrive around nine. I help myself to some Mormon punch-spritemixedwithrainbowsherbetandasplashofpineapplejuice-whenFranniesees me and comes over.

"Sorrythecake'salreadygone,"shesays,wrinklinghernoseinadisplayofsympathy."It went quick."

She looks down at her cup and runs her finger along the rim of it. She's doing something differentwithhermakeup.Athinsmudgeofbrowneyelinerjustoverherlashline.It'sstrange seeing her in a different state than she's usually in, no matter how small the difference. Makes mewonderifit'sachangeshemadespecificallyfortheevent,oristhisjustwhosheisnow.A girl who wears eyeliner.

"It'sbeensoweird,"shesays."Notsee-eeneachother.Forthewholesummerreally…"

Shebitesherlip,hesitating,buyingtimetodecideifshereallywantstocommittowhateve she's about to say. And then she says it.

"I've missedyou."

No "best friend". No secret reassurance-seeking. No hidden question underneathasking,

*Haveyoumissedme?*

Juststatement.Plainandvulnerable.

“I’ve missed you too.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

Andwebothmeanitthesameway.Neithersayingitinanattempttoreignitethefriendship get it back to what it used to be. Instead saying it in acceptance that we can't. That we've outgrown it. Both of us have. The missing isn't a plea for reignition. It stands alone, in and of itself, the beginning and the end, nothing to do about it.

"IsawyourpostaboutBYU,"Isay."Thecampuslooksreallypretty…"

"Yeah, it'll be hard to be away from Tristan for so long

though…"

"Oh,right.His,um,thing–"

"His

mission,

yeah."

"Mission.Right.Where'shegoing?""Romania."

"Far.""Yeah…"

ShespotsTristanacrosstheroomandwaves,andhereyeslightupwhenhewavesback.Sh leans forward and grabs my arm.

"Sowehaven'ttoldanyonebesidesfamily,butIwanttotellyou,"shesays,hertonehushe and giddy. "We're gonna get engaged before he goes away. Might even get married if we can pullareceptiontogether.Buteitherway,we'reget-eenengaged,justsothatthecommitmentis in place."

"Wow…"

"Yeah.We'reprettyexcited.Wejustwannajumprightinsowecanstarthave-eenkidswhen he gets back…"

OceanofPDF.com

She goes on to tell me they're thinking three kids, maybe four, and that they already have a shortlistofnamespickedout.Fourgirlnamesandfourboynames,andthenthey'llusetheext names as middle names. All her kids' names picked out and I can hardly pick out an outfit.

"Doesitscareyouatall?"Iask."Alreadyknowinghowthenexttwentyyearsofyourlifea gonna go?"

"Noway,"Franniesays."*Not*know-eeniswhatfreaksmeout.RemindsmeofthisquoteI sawonapageinmyplanner,Ireallylikedit:'Ifyoudon'tknowwhereyou'rego-een,you'll end up somewhere else.'"

"What if 'somewhere else' is better than where you were going?" Iask.

"Huh,"Franniesays,lookingoff,reallyconsideringit."Ican'timaginethat,giventhatI' put so much thought into know-een exactly where I want to go."

Shesipsthelastofherdrinkandsetsitdownonthetable."Sowhataboutyou? Nowthat high school's over, what're you think-een?"

"Idunnoreally,ifI'mbeinghonest.Takingitonedayatatime,Iguess."

I try to read her face, to see if this lackadaisical admission will break her, but she just smiles. "That can be good, too," she says. "Figure-een it out as you go, not think-een about thefuture all the time. Just live-een in the present. 'Wherever you are, be there totally.' That's another quotefrommyplanner.Which,cometothinkofit,iskindofafunnyquotetoputinaplanner."

*OceanofPDF.com*

IgetbackfromFrannie'spartytofindKorgylyingdespondentonthecouchinafetalposition. An empty bottle of scotch is on the coffee table in front of him right next to his printed outmanuscript.

"Did you finish yournovel?"

"No,"hesays,staringvacantlyattheshut-offTV."Iquitit."

IknowIneedtotreadlightly,soIgrabaglassfromthecupboardandpourmyselfsome water to buy time to form a delicate-enough follow-up question.

"What do you mean you quit it?" Iask.

"It's bad. It doesn't work, Waldo," he says. "The excitement I felt toward you, toward us, mademebelieveIcoulddosomethingthatIcan't.ButIwaskiddingmyself.Deludingmyself I'm not a writer. I've never been one."

Iopenmymouthtoconvincehimotherwise,togivehimthepep-talkthatIfeellikeIshould, themotivationalspeechthatwillmakehimbelievehe'sallthethingshewisheshewasandthe some, but no words come out.

OceanofPDF.com

“Thiscouldbegoodforus,”hesays,notseemingtorealizethatit’saphraseonlyissuedonce things have already gone bad.

I wish I could agree that a 5-day stint in Hawaii is all that we need. That a couple of pina coladasbyapoolinseventy-twodegreeweatherwillresuscitatethatpivotalpiecebetweenus that has died. But I’m not so sure.

I thumb the lei around my neck, the one that I found sitting on the doorstep when I got back fromwork,withastickynoteattachedthatread‘Youfoundme!Hiphiphooray! Yournextclue iswhereyouLEI’.Ididn’tneedhimtoputtheword‘lei’inall-capsformetoclockthepun,but he did, and it made me sad. To see how hard he’s trying.

Onthebedwasmynextclue,tapedtoasackofchocolate-coatedmacadamianuts.“Enjoy me then find your next clue, right next to your Pantene shampoo.”

“Iknowyoudon’tusePantene,”hesaidwithaself-consciouschuckle,“ButIneededa two-syllable word for the rhythm…”

In the shower caddy that hangs over the faucet, next to my regular (Garnier Fructis) shampoo, there was a fresh new bottle. Coconut, “with notes of guava!” the package eagerly swore.Thenextstickynotewastapedtothefrontofthebottle:“Yourfinalclueonthismission is on the island in the kitchen.”

“I figured a soft-rhyme was fine…” he said,blushing.

And I reassured him that it was as we made our way to the kitchen, where

I found on the

islandthetwoticketstoHawaii,withafinalstickynote:“Let’srelax,youandme!

We’regoing to Hawaii!”

He was looking for a big reaction, so I let out some kind of squeal that soundedboth

*OceanofPDF.com*

unnatural and embarrassing, but I could tell it wasn't enough. And that's when he launched in that he knows it's been a rocky couple of months, that summer's about to be over and he has to getbacktoteachingsoon.Thathewantsustohavesomequalitytimetogether.Thathewantst bepresentwithmeinawaythathe'sstruggledtobewithallthestressorsoflife.Thatthiscould be good for us.

"*Really*goodforus,"hesays,emphasizingit.Histoneissofullofconviction,andIwantsc badly to believe him.

"You'reright,"Isay,"Thiscouldbegoodforus."

*OceanofPDF.com*

We're sitting at Gate 9 in the A concourse at the Anchorage airport. We're two hours early for theflight,soKorgygoestograbussnackswhileIstaybehindtochargeourphones.Hecomes back with a few healthy options, dried fruits and nuts, protein bars, and teriyaki flavored seaweed snacks.

"Promiseme you'llat least trythem," hesays. So Ido. Theprotein bar'sdecent.

WeplayabacklogofWordles,thenConnections,thenSpellingBee,thenstretchourlegs and grab a salami sandwich to share. The flight finally starts to board.

"I'mgonnapeerealquick,"Isay.

"Alright,

hurry," he

says.

I find the nearest restroom, but instead of going in, I walk in the opposite direction, to the far sideoftheconcourse,andIwaitinlineforaCinnabon.ItcomesouthotandbigandfluffyandI eat it from its container while I head toward the front of the airport. I order an Uber and get in the car to head home.

I had told Mom I was going with the Hickle's on their family vacation, so I text her that the flight was cancelled, knowing she won't check to confirm. Mr. Korgy calls six times on the drive,panickingaboutwhereI'mat.IhopehetakestheflightandthatthereI'snoturbulencean that his check-in process at the hotel is free of hassle and that he gets a premium room with an ocean view. I hope he gets the best chaise lounge by the pool and I hope he eats a lot of chicken wings and sips a lot of mai tais.

TheUberpullsuptothecurbandIgetout.Iboundupthestairstwoatatime,lighterthan I've been in months. Peppier. Guess that's what happens without the dead weight of a
middle-aged man and all hisregrets.

OceanofPDF.com

“Ma!”Icallout,swingingthefrontdooropen.“Yougetmytext?”

I head down the hallway toward her bedroom, ready to surprise her. Make good on that elusive promise of a road trip to Seward. Pitch a tent, catch a fish, stay up until three in the morning swapping memorieswhilesharingasleeveofNutterButters,swearingwitheachcookiethat“thisisourlastone” while secretly knowing we’re about to go for another.

HerbedroomdoorisacrackopenedsoIpushitopenalltheway.Mom’slyinginherbed…rightnext to Tony. Who’s going down on her with his blackened tobacco tongue.

“Ohmygod,”Momsays,pushingTonyoffherandpullingupthecovers.

“Jesus Christ, ever heard of knocking?” Tony asks.

“God,sorry,”Isay.“Sorry…”

“Honey,hi,”Momsays,brushingherhairoffhersweatycheeks.“I,um…

I…” “Hi, Tony,” I say plainly.

“Hi,Wanda,”hesaysplainly.

“Look,sweetheart,I,um…TonyandIworkedthroughour…differencesand–”

I want the rage to boil in me. To make me throw her jewelry tray at the wall and interrogate her. Ask how long she’s been lying to me. To herself. When she stopped going to SLAA. Or if she’s still going, Jekyll and Hyde-ing it. I want to scream. Or cry. But instead I just stare at her as an immaculate wave washes over me. A wave of recognition. Of peace. Of freedom. The peace and freedom that can only come from lowering your expectations of someone. From letting go of that person you wanted them tobe, needed them to be, and in the letting go of that version, letting go, too, of all the resentments that camefromthemnotbeingthatversion.Inthiswave,Ireleaseher.Tobeherself.Todealwithherself.To tolerateherself.Tomakeherownchoicesandmistakes.Todowhateversheneedssoshecangetthrough life. So that I can do the same.

Idon’tsayawordasIheadout,shuttingthedoorsoftlybehindme.

*OceanofPDF.com*

Myhand'soutthewindowlikeasingerina90smusicvideo,myhairblowinginthewind.It'sjustme and my jalopy and the open road. I'm halfway to Seward, a dozen calls deep from Korgy and six from Mom, when I finally shut off my phone.

KorgywillwanttogettogetherwhenI'mback.Haveaconversationatleast,he'llsay.Ioweittohim, he'll say. But do I? What do I owe the man who gave up the life he knew for me? And was it really for me? It was a life he was already drowning in, bitter about, and regretful of. Was I really anything more than a floaty vest with a vagina?

I wasn't the one with the wife. And the son. And the mortgage. And the job I was tired of. The stale middle-agedlife.Heleftitall.Hechosetoleaveitall.And,sure,Iseducedhim.Iaidedandabettedhis mistake. So I ought to be partially liable. Held accountable. Or at least burdened by the weight of mysins.

Only I'm not. And something about that feels unfair. A marriage ruined, a toddler scarred, a woman scorned, a broken man, and here I am driving away, scot-free, humming along to a pop song I didn't knowIknew.I'masclosetocarefreeasI'veeverbeen,glimpsingindependence-notneglectdressedup as independence, but the real thing - for maybe the first time in my life. No obligations to anyone. No commitments. No promises that probably would have been broken anyway. Just me. With myself.

Then again, it's not like I'm unscathed. Like my carefreeness is some chipper, psychotic reaction to damage I single handedly caused. The carefreeness feels hard-earned. The lack of tears isn't a result of therenotbeingany,butoftherebeingtoomany,somanyduringwhenwewere"together"thatthereare none left now that we're not. Maybe I've already done my time.

I'mlowongassoIpullintoamom-and-popstation.Whilethecar'sfillingup,Iheadintotheshopto pee and grab some snacks. Doritos, a sack of Sour Patch Kids, and a carrot and celery tray with ranch dressing. For balance.

OceanofPDF.com

Iheadtothecheckoutcounter.Theboyworkingitishot.Probablyayearortwoolderthanme.

Shavedhead,skinny,inDickiesandVans,withalotoftattoosand,fuckme,blueeyes.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey,”Isay.

Hescansanitem.*Beep*.Andanother.*Beep*.Andanother.*Beep*.

“You want a bag?” he asks.

“No,I’mgood.”

“You

want

my

number?”

“Maybeonmywayback.”

*OceanofPDF.com*